

# FIVE KINGDOMS

SKY RAIDERS



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OF THE FABLEHAVEN AND BEYONDERS SERIES

FOR LIZ, WHO WANTED SKY CASTLES



*Castles in the sky sit stranded, vandalized.*

—“A Dustland Fairytale,”

by the Killers (written by Brandon Flowers)



## CHAPTER

# 1

# HALLOWEEN

**W**eaving down the hall, Cole avoided a ninja, a witch, a pirate, and a zombie bride. He paused when a sad clown in a trench coat and fedora waved at him. “Dalton?”

His friend nodded and smiled, which looked weird since his mouth was painted into a frown. “I wondered if you’d recognize me.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Cole replied, relieved to see that his best friend had worn an elaborate costume. He had worried that his own outfit was too much.

They met up in the middle of the hall. Kids streamed by on either side; some dressed for Halloween, some not.

“Ready to score some candy tonight?” Dalton asked.

Cole hesitated. Now that they were sixth graders, he was a little nervous that people would think they were too old to go door to door. He didn’t want to look like a kindergartener. “Have you heard about the haunted house on Wilson?”

“The spook alley house?” Dalton clarified. “I heard it has live rats and snakes.”

Cole nodded. “The guy who moved in there is supposed to be a special-effects expert. I guess he worked on some big movies. It might just be hype, but I keep hearing amazing things. We should check it out.”

“Yeah, sure, I’m curious,” Dalton said. “But I don’t want to skip the candy.”

Cole thought for a minute. He *had* noticed some sixth graders trick-or-treating in his neighborhood last year. A few kids had looked even older. Besides, did it matter what anyone else thought? If people were handing out free candy, why not take advantage? They already had the costumes. “Okay. We can start early.”

“That’ll work.”

The first bell rang. Class would start soon. “See you,” Cole said.

“Later.”

Cole walked into his classroom, noticing that Jenna Hunt was already at her desk. Cole tried not to care. He liked her, but not in *that* way. Sure, in the past he might have felt excited and scared whenever she was around, but now she was just a friend.

At least that was what he kept telling himself as he tried to take his seat behind her. He was dressed up as a scarecrow that had been used for archery practice. The feathered shafts protruding from his chest and side made it tricky to sit down.

Had he ever had a crush on Jenna? Maybe, when he was younger. During second grade, the girls went through a phase when they ran around trying to

kiss the boys at recess. It had been disgusting. Like tag, except with cooties involved. The teachers had been against it. Cole had been against it too—except when it was with Jenna. When she was chasing him, a secret part of him wanted to get caught.

It wasn't his fault he kept noticing Jenna during third, fourth, and fifth grades. She was too pretty. He wasn't the only one who thought so. She had modeled in some catalogs. Her dark hair had just the right amount of curl, and her thick eyelashes made her eyes look made-up, even when she wasn't wearing makeup.

He sometimes used to daydream about older jerks picking on Jenna. In his imagination, he would come along and save the day with a burst of bravery and action-movie karate skills. Afterward, he would be forced to suffer through her tearful thanks.

But everything had changed at the start of sixth grade. Jenna had not only ended up in his class, but by pure chance the seating chart had placed him directly behind her. They had worked together on group projects. He had learned to relax around her, and they had started to talk regularly and make jokes. She had turned out to be cooler than he had hoped. They were actually becoming friends. So there was no reason for his heart to pound just because she was dressed up like Cleopatra.

A graded test sat on top of his test, a circled 96 in red ink proclaiming his success. Tests waited on the other empty desks as well. Cole tried not to spy on the other scores, but he couldn't help noticing that his neighbors got a 72 and an 88.

Jenna turned and looked at him. She wore a wig of limp black hair with ruler-straight bangs. Dramatic makeup accentuated her eyes. A golden circlet with a snake at the front served as her crown. “What are you?” she asked. “A dead scarecrow?”

“Close,” Cole replied. “I’m a scarecrow that got used for target practice.”

“Are those real arrows?”

“Yeah, but I broke off the tips. Halloween or not, I figured they would send me home if I brought sharp arrows to school.”

“You aced another test. I thought scarecrows weren’t supposed to have brains.”

“I wasn’t a scarecrow yesterday. I like your costume.”

“Do you know who I am?”

Cole scrunched his face, as if she had stumped him. “A ghost?”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “You know, right?”

He nodded. “You’re one of the most famous ladies in history. Queen Elizabeth.”

“Wrong country.”

“I’m kidding. Cleopatra.”

“Wrong again. Are you even trying?”

“Seriously? I thought I knew it for sure.”

“I’m Cleopatra’s twin sister.”

“You got me.”

“Maybe I should have come as Dorothy all shot up with arrows,” Jenna said. “Then we would have matched.”

“We could have been the sadder ending to *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“The ending where the wizard turns out to be Robin Hood.”

Laini Palmer sat in the desk next to Jenna’s. She was dressed as the Statue of Liberty. Jenna turned and started talking to her.

Cole glanced at the clock. There were still a few minutes before class would begin. Jenna had a habit of arriving by the first bell, and Cole had coincidentally developed the same habit. More kids were coming in: a zombie, a vampire fairy, a rock star, an army guy. Kevin Murdock wore no costume. Neither did Sheila Jones.

When Jenna had finished talking to Laini, Cole tapped her shoulder. “Have you heard about that new haunted house?”

“On Wilson Avenue?” Jenna asked. “People keep talking about it. I’ve never really been scared by Halloween decorations. I always know they’re fake.”

“The guy who just moved in there supposedly did effects for Hollywood,” Cole replied. “I heard that some of the stuff in his spook alley is real. Like, live bats and tarantulas and amputated body parts from hospitals.”

“I guess that might be freaky,” Jenna admitted. “I’d have to see it to believe it.”

“It’s supposed to be free. Are you going trick-or-treating?”

“Yeah, with Lacie and Sarah. You?”

“I was planning to go around with Dalton.” He was relieved she would be out hunting candy as well.

“Do you know the address?” Jenna asked.

“For the haunted house? I wrote it down.”

“We should check it out. Want to meet up around seven?”



Cole tried to keep his expression casual. “Where?”

“Do you know that old guy’s house on the corner, with the huge flagpole?”

“Sure.” Everybody in the area knew that house. It was one story, but the flagpole was basically a skyscraper. The old guy looked like a veteran. He raised and lowered the flag every morning and night. “Meet there?”

“Bring the address.”

Cole retrieved a notebook from his backpack and opened it. While he looked for his homework, his mind strayed. He had never hung out with Jenna after school, but it wasn’t like they were going on a date. They would just be part of a group of kids checking to see if a spook alley was actually cool.

Mr. Brock started class a few moments later. He was dressed as a cowboy with chaps, a big hat, and a sheriff’s badge. The outfit made it tough to take him seriously.



Cole walked along the street beside Dalton, one foot on the curb, the other in the gutter. He was still a scarecrow bristling with arrows. The straw poking out from his neck kept tickling the bottom of his chin. Dalton remained a gloomy clown.

“She wanted to meet at the flagpole?” Dalton verified.

“Just near the house,” Cole said. “Not on his lawn.”

Dalton pulled back the sleeve of his coat and checked his watch. “We’re going to be early.”

“Only a little.”

“Are you nervous?”

Cole shot him a scowl. “I’m not afraid of haunted houses.”

“I don’t mean the spook alley,” Dalton clarified. “Haven’t you always sort of liked—”

“No, Dalton, come on,” Cole interrupted. “Be serious. It isn’t like that. We’re friends.”

Dalton bobbed his eyebrows up and down. “My parents say they started out as friends.”

“Gross, knock it off.” Cole couldn’t let Dalton say or do anything that might make Jenna suspect he thought she was cute. “I should have never told you I used to like her. That was forever ago. We’re just doing this for fun.”

Dalton squinted up ahead. “Looks like a big group.”

He was right. They found Jenna waiting with seven other kids—three of them boys. She was still dressed like Cleopatra.

“Here they are,” Jenna announced. “We can go now.”

“I have the address,” Cole offered.

“I know where it is,” Blake said. “I went by earlier tonight.”

“What’s it like?” Dalton asked.

“I didn’t go inside,” Blake replied. “I just live nearby.”

Cole knew Blake from school. He was the kind of guy who liked to take charge and talked a lot. He always wanted to be goalie at recess, even though he wasn’t that good.

As they started walking, Blake took the lead. Cole fell in beside Jenna. “So what’s your name?” Cole asked.

“Huh?” she replied. “Cleopatra?”

“No, you’re her twin.”

“Right. Want to guess?”

“Irma?”

“That doesn’t sound very Egyptian.”

“Queen Tut?”

“Sure, let’s go with that.” Jenna laughed lightly, then strayed over to her friend Sarah and started talking. Cole fell back to walk with Dalton.

“Do you think the spook alley will actually be freaky?” Dalton asked.

“It better be,” Cole said. “I have my hopes up.”

Blake set a quick pace. They marched briskly, passing a herd of little kids with plastic superhero faces. Most of the houses had halfhearted decorations. Some had none. A few had really elaborate jack-o’-lanterns that must have been carved using patterns.

Dalton elbowed Cole and nodded toward a doorway. A portly witch was handing out full-size Twix bars to a group of little kids.

“It’s okay,” Cole said, hefting his pillowcase. “We already made a good haul.”

“Not much full-size candy,” Dalton pointed out.

“A few little Twixes are just as good,” Cole said, unsure about whether he had any in his bag.

“I heard they have some real cadavers,” Blake was explaining. “Dead bodies donated to science but stolen to use as decorations.”

“Think that’s true?” Dalton wondered.

“I doubt it,” Cole replied. “The guy would end up in jail.”

“What do you know about it?” Blake challenged. “Have you been stealing corpses?”

“Nope,” Cole said. “Your mom was too broke to hire me.”

Everyone laughed at that one, and Blake had no reply. Cole had always been good at comebacks. It was his best defense mechanism and usually kept other kids from bothering him.

As they continued down the street, Cole tried to think of an excuse to walk alongside Jenna. Unfortunately, she now had Lacie on one side and Sarah on the other. Cole had spoken with Jenna enough to feel fairly natural around her. Sarah and Lacie were a different story. He couldn’t work up the nerve to barge in and hijack their conversation. Every possible comment that came to mind seemed clumsy and forced. At least Dalton was getting plenty of proof that he and Jenna were only friends.

Cole paid attention to the route. Part of him hoped Blake would lead them the wrong way, but he made no mistakes. When the spook alley house came into view, Blake displayed it to the others as if he had decorated it personally.

The house looked decent on the outside. Much better than average. A few fake ravens perched on the roof. Webby curtains hung from the rain gutters. One of the jack-o’-lanterns puked seeds and pulp all over the sidewalk. The lawn had lots of cardboard headstones, with an occasional plastic hand or leg poking up through the grass.

“Pretty good,” Dalton conceded.

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “After all the buildup, I was expecting granite tombstones with actual human skeletons. Maybe some ghost holograms.”

“The best stuff might be inside,” Dalton said.

“We’ll see,” Cole replied. He paused, studying the details. Why did he feel so disappointed? Why did he care about the impressiveness of the decorations? Because he had talked Jenna into coming here. If the haunted house was cool, he might get some reflected glory. If it was weak, she would have gone out of her way for nothing. Was that really it? Maybe he was just frustrated that he had hardly talked to her.

Blake led the way to the door. He knocked while the other nine kids mobbed the porch. A guy with long hair and a stubbly beard answered. He had a cleaver through his head, with plenty of blood draining from the wound.

“He must be the special-effects pro,” Dalton murmured.

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “It’s pretty gory, but not the ultimate.”

The fatally injured man stepped away from the door to invite them in. A strobe light flashed nonstop. Dry-ice smoke drifted across the floor. Tinfoil coated the walls, reflecting the pulsing light. There were webs and skulls and candelabras. A knight in full armor came toward them, raising a huge sword. The strobe light made his movements jerky. A couple of the girls screamed.

The knight lowered his sword. He moved around a little more, mostly from side to side, trying to milk the moment, but he was less menacing because he had failed to pursue his attack. Seeming to realize he was no longer very threatening, the knight started doing robotic dance moves. A few of the kids laughed.

Cole frowned, feeling even more disappointed. “Why did everyone build this up so much?” he asked Dalton.

“What were you expecting?” Dalton replied.

Cole shrugged. “Rabid wolves fighting to the death.”

“It’s not bad,” Dalton consoled.

“Too much hype,” Cole replied. “My expectations were through the roof.”

Turning, he found Jenna beside him. “Are you terrified?”

“Not really,” she said, looking around appraisingly. “I don’t see any body parts. They did a good job, though.”

The clunky knight was retreating to his hiding place. The cleaver guy started distributing candy—miniatures, but he gave everybody two or three.

Then an older kid with messy hair wandered into the hall. He was skinny, probably around college age. He wore jeans and an orange T-shirt that said BOO in huge black letters. Otherwise he had no costume.

“Was this scary enough?” he asked nonchalantly.

A couple of the girls said yes. Most of the kids were silent. Cole felt like it would be rude to tell the truth.

The Boo guy folded his skinny arms across his chest. “Some of you don’t look very frightened. Anybody want to see the really scary part?”

He acted serious, but it also could have been a setup for some corny joke.

“Sure,” Cole volunteered. Jenna and a bunch of the others chimed in as well.

The Boo guy stared at them like he was a general and this new batch of troops might not be up to his standards. “All right, if you say so. Fair warning: If any of this other stuff was freaky at all, don’t come.”

Two of the girls started shaking their heads and backing toward the door. One of them turned and buried her head against Stuart Fulsom. Stu left with

them.

“Check out Stu,” Cole muttered to Dalton. “He thinks he’s Dr. Love.”

“Why would those girls have come in the first place if they didn’t want to get freaked out?” Dalton complained.

Cole shrugged. If Jenna had wanted to bail, would he have left with her? Maybe if she had buried her head against his chest, trembling with worry . . .

The remaining seven kids followed the Boo guy. He led them through a regular kitchen to a white door with a plain brass knob. “It’s down in the basement. I won’t be coming. You sure you want to go? It’s really messed up.”

Blake opened the door and led the way down. Cole and Dalton shared a glance. They had come this far. No way were they wimping out now. None of the others chickened out either.

## CHAPTER

## 2

# SPOOK ALLEY

**C**ole followed Jenna down into the dark basement. Not far beyond the foot of the creaky stairs, black curtains ran from the floor to the ceiling on all sides, concealing most of the room. The only light leaked from an old lantern on a low stool. Grimy and rusty, it looked like a relic from the Old West.

Dalton tugged on Cole's sleeve. Dramatic shadows fell across his face, making his frowning clown makeup look eerie. A painted tear sparkled on one cheek, the glitter in it barely reflecting the lantern's glow.

"That guy locked the door," Dalton whispered. He had been the last one down the stairs.

"What?"

"The Boo shirt guy. When he shut the door, I heard it click, so I checked. We're locked down here."

Sighing, Cole glanced up the stairs. "He probably just did it to add suspense."

"I don't like it," Dalton insisted.



Cole had been friends with Dalton since moving to Mesa, Arizona, from Boise in first grade. They liked a lot of the same books and video games. They both played soccer and liked riding their bikes. But Dalton tended to get easily stressed.

Cole recalled a time at the movies when Dalton accidentally left his ticket stub in the restroom before the show. Dalton had spent the rest of the time freaking out that the movie police were going to catch him without it and accuse him of theater hopping. He finally went and confessed to a worker about his lost stub. Of course the guy told him not to worry about it.

“It’s just for effect,” Cole assured his friend. “They’re trying to make it scarier.”

Dalton shook his head. “He did it quietly. I barely heard it. What kind of effect does it have when nobody hears it?”

“You heard it. You checked. You’re scared. Seems like they’re experts.”

“Or psychopaths.”

The five other kids were milling around at the bottom of the stairs. Blake had crouched to inspect the lantern. Stepping away from the light, he tugged at one of the black curtains. “This way.”

As he pulled the drapery aside, Blake revealed a large man. Lantern light reflected off a mostly bald head with a bristly fringe around the sides. His wide, flat nose topped a drooping handlebar mustache. A fragile bone protruded from one earlobe. His overalls looked homemade, sloppily patched together from rough material. Curly hair sprouted from his thick bare shoulders.

Most of the kids jumped or stepped back. Lacie shrieked. The bulky stranger grinned at the reaction. Two of his teeth looked like they were made of dull gray metal.

“Ready to be scared?” he asked, eyes eager. His voice had a vaguely Southern twang. He rubbed his meaty hands together.

Cole glanced at Dalton. Maybe his friend had been right. He didn’t like the idea of being locked down here with this weirdo.

“Who are you?” Jenna asked.

“Me?” the man replied, squinting at her. “You came here to be frightened, am I wrong?”

“That’s right,” Blake said.

The big stranger leered. “I’ll make sure you get what you came for. I’ll take you around, be certain you behave. You mustn’t touch anything.”

Dalton stepped closer to Cole. Jenna held hands with Chelsea.

“They call me Ham,” the man said, picking up the lantern. He reeked of dust and sweat. “Tonight I will guide you to terrors like you have never known. Sure you want to keep going?”

“The door is locked,” Dalton said weakly, twitching his chin toward the stairs.

Ham glared at Dalton. “Then you’d better stay with me.” The big man held the curtain aside. Blake led the way through. Cole and Dalton brought up the rear.

Cole was one of the shorter kids in his grade, as was Dalton. They barely came up to Ham’s chest. After they had moved beyond the curtain, Ham let it fall.

More dark curtains created a perimeter around the next space. Bones lay on the floor, some a little yellowed, some cracked or chipped. Human bones mingled with strange animal bones. To one side of the space rested a skull that was the size of a shopping cart and had a pair of thick broken tusks. It couldn't be real. The giant skull didn't match any animal Cole could picture, not even prehistoric ones. But it looked just as genuine as the other bones, which probably meant they were all fake.

Blake picked up what looked like an arm bone. "This feels realistic," he said.

"Real as you are," Ham replied.

"Run!" a young voice screamed, coming from somewhere behind the curtains to the left. "It's almost too late. Run for it! This isn't a—"

The voice was abruptly cut off.

Ham grinned. "You weren't supposed to hear that. Pay it no mind."

Dalton gave Cole a worried look. Cole had to admit the warning was a nice touch. It had sounded sincere. And Ham was unsettling. He seemed a little off—not very bright, big, creepy-looking, maybe not totally sane. He was the perfect pick to host a scary tour. Could he be a professional actor?

The curtains at the far side of the area parted, and a short swarthy woman emerged. She had a stocky build and wispy black whiskers above the sides of her mouth. Strands of gray highlighted her tangled black hair. Her clothes looked like layers of tattered rags.

"Last group," the woman announced, her eyes on Ham. "Ansel wants to get gone."

"Ansel is the boss," Ham replied.

The woman turned her attention to the visitors. “You kids came here to be scared. What do you know of fear? What do you know about hardship? You come from a soft, fat world full of soft, fat communities that breed soft, fat children. What kind of world celebrates bleakness on its holidays? A world that knows no bleakness. A world where bleakness has become a novelty.”

“Is this going to be educational?” Blake sighed with despair.

The woman smiled. “I expect it might be very educational. You came here for thrills, boy, and thrills you will have.”

“I hope so,” Blake said. “These bones are about as scary as a museum.”

“If you had any sense, the bones would scare you plenty,” the woman said. “The bones are a warning. The bones are trophies. You came here to feel fear, and it is only fair you should be rewarded. Fear can be relative. What frightens one may not frighten another. Take this hunter roach, for example.”

She held up a mottled brown cockroach the size of a bar of soap. The roach squirmed and hissed, legs wriggling. A pair of long antennae swiveled and twitched. As she held it, the roach curled its head to repeatedly strike at her thumb.

“See it biting me?” the woman asked. “On the prairie, you either build up a tolerance to the venom, or you die. Would any of you care to hold it?”

Nobody volunteered.

The woman shrugged. “To you this critter might seem scary. And maybe it should, because its venom would burn and fester beneath your skin. Might even kill you. But to me it’s a snack.” She popped the cockroach into her mouth and chewed. Cole heard it crunching. Black juice dribbled from one corner of her lips. She wiped it away with the back of her hand, leaving a

faint smeared stain. Cole glanced over at Dalton, who made a gagging face. Lacie and Sarah turned away, murmuring hysterically to each other. The woman's eyes were on Blake. "Scared yet?"

"A little," Blake admitted. "But that was more gross than scary."

The woman gave a small smile. "You have no idea what lies beyond those curtains. You are all in quite a predicament. Would it scare you to know that your time in this world is over? Would it scare you to know that you will never see your families again? Would it scare you to know that all your plans and expectations for what your lives would hold became irrelevant when you walked down those stairs?"

"That isn't funny," Jenna said. "Halloween or not, you shouldn't make those kinds of jokes."

Cole agreed with Jenna. With those threats, the woman was crossing a line that should not be crossed. The locked door and the creepiness of Ham and the shouted warning and the eating of the bug were adding up in ways he didn't like. They really might be in trouble. If it was all a trick, it was working.

The woman nodded. "You're catching on. None of this is funny. You belong to us now. You kids want to be scared?" She raised her voice. "Time to pack up! Tear down the drapes! Let's round up these stragglers and get gone!"

Many of the black curtains began to fall, torn down or hurled aside. Various men were revealed. A muscular redhead in a leather vest and buckskin trousers clutched a short metal rod. A pale, lanky man with white hair bared teeth that had been filed down to cruel triangles. A short Asian man in robes and a tightly wrapped turban held a net and a wooden pole.

And a person with the head of a wolf and golden fur flexed fingers tipped with claws. If it was a costume, it was the best one Cole had ever seen.

A few other men were in view, but Cole found his attention straying past the grubby assortment of villains. His eyes went to the cages. Beyond the curtains, on both sides of the room, were cages packed with kids in Halloween costumes. The kids were seated, subdued, defeated.

Part of Cole still hoped this was all an elaborate hoax. If this was just part of the spook alley, then the creators had succeeded, because he felt certain that he and his friends were in genuine danger—that the men advancing on them were not actors in costumes, they were real criminals. The captives in the cages were definitely kids from the neighborhood. Cole recognized a few of them.

The men charged forward. The redhead seized Blake by the back of the neck and hurled him to the ground. Ham was reaching for Jenna.

That was all Cole needed to see. If these guys were getting physical, this was officially real. Stepping toward Ham, Cole swung his candy bag at the lantern as if he were trying to knock it out of a ballpark. The casing shattered with a flash, plunging the room into darkness.

Somebody jostled roughly into him, and Cole went down. He could see nothing. People were screaming. He rose, staggering blindly toward where he thought the stairs would be. Somebody had to get away. If these were kidnappers, somebody had to make it to the police before the situation turned even uglier.

Cole found himself tangled in curtains. Yanking desperately, he pulled them down. Instead of falling and letting him pass, the drapes landed on him.

He tried to keep moving forward, but he hurried straight into a wall and fell.

A moment later a light came on. Instinctively, Cole held still. He was hidden beneath the fallen curtains. He heard orders being shouted. More lights were lit.

Moving slowly, Cole peeked out from under the edge of the drapery. An overhead electric light was on, along with three glowing lanterns. He had run exactly the wrong way. He was on the far side of the room, away from the stairs that led up to the kitchen. His friends were being manhandled into cages.

The stocky woman stood conversing with a lean man in a wide-brimmed hat and a long weathered duster. He held a sickle in one veiny hand.

Ham tromped up the stairs. He knocked on the door three times, hard enough to make it shake. The Boo guy opened it.

“We’re done,” Ham said.

“Good,” Boo replied. “Great. I take it you’re satisfied?”

“You did your part.” Ham grunted, handing over a bulging sack. Boo accepted it. When he reached inside, Cole heard the unmistakable clink and rattle of coins. From his position on the floor, where he had slightly tented the curtain so he could peer out, Cole caught a glint of gold as Boo removed a few coins from the sack, weighing them in his hand.

“Do you need anything else from us?” Boo asked.

Ham looked back at the lean man in the duster, who shook his head. “Just get far away from here. After that, rest easy. Nobody will be able to follow us. Nobody will see these kids again. They’ll soon be forgotten.”

Boo hefted the bag of coins in a sort of salute. "A pleasure. Safe travels. Happy Halloween." He closed the door.

Ham came back down the stairs. He and the redhead wrestled the lid off a manhole cover in the center of the room. The pale man with the funky teeth walked over to one of the cages, keys in hand.

The lean man in the wide-brimmed hat held up a hand, and the room went silent. "Smart children," he said in a parched voice, not much more than a stage whisper. "You behaved well. Most of you kept silent as directed. Those who did not suffered as promised. We do not wish to harm you. This will be orderly. You will pay if you try something. We will make an example of you. We are your masters now. Treat us with due respect, and we will deal with you fairly." He motioned with his sickle for the pale man to proceed.

The cage opened. Kids filed out. They all wore iron collars. Their legs were chained together. Cole guessed they were mostly between fifth and seventh grades. He saw no really little ones. One boy dressed as a pirate was gagged and had a huge bruise on his cheek that did not seem to be part of his costume.

The kids were paraded over to the open manhole. Ham went down first, slowly disappearing as he descended an unseen ladder. Before his head vanished, he paused. "When the rungs stop, just drop," he said. Then his head was gone.

The first kid, a girl with sparkly horns and a red cape, paused at the brink. "Down there?"

"Go," the pale man urged. "You're worth more alive, but we can make use of more bones."



She turned. It seemed awkward for her to get started with her ankles chained together. She crouched and started down.

Cole slowly let the edge of the curtain fall, closing off his view. He had ended up near a far corner of the room. There were fallen curtains everywhere, resting in lumpy piles. If he kept still, they might miss him. Unless they picked up the curtains before they left.

Where could the manhole lead? Were there big sewer tunnels running under Mesa? Apparently, they at least had some under this neighborhood. Maybe they would surface inside a warehouse where semitrailers stood waiting. Maybe the trucks would head over the border along some secret route. Anything seemed possible.

Occasionally a kid would protest from down in the manhole. The men up top would growl at him or her to drop. Cole heard several echoing screams trail off ominously.

These criminals were kidnapping dozens of people. They were taking Dalton. They were taking Jenna. He had to do something.

But he had to be smart. If he emerged now, he would get caught. Once they were gone, he could probably climb the stairs, break down the door, and go to the police. Would it be too late? Would the cops be able to follow the kidnappers through the sewers? If alerted quickly, would the authorities be able to guess where these men might be headed? What about Boo? Had he already left with the other spook alley workers? Or would they all be there, waiting for him?

Cole wished he had a cell phone. His parents had decided he was too young to need one. If they could see him now, he suspected they might

rethink their policy.

He lay with his chin on the cement floor. The heavy drapes were making him sweat. His heart thudded in his chest.

Cole peeked again. Now that the kids understood the drill, the procession into the manhole was going fast.

He closed his peephole. Nobody was looking his way. Nobody was talking about a kid gone missing. One of the men was gathering up bones, but nobody was gathering curtains.

How could somebody kidnap this many people? It should be national news! There had to be more than forty kids. The whole town would be in an uproar! The whole *country* would demand answers!

Raising the edge of the curtain, Cole watched as the last kids descended into the hole. Jenna was among them. Dalton was already gone. Cole had missed it. Some of the men had gone down as well.

The man in the wide-brimmed hat checked an old-fashioned pocket watch. "The way will close in less than ten minutes."

"Excellent timing, Ansel," the woman said. "This was a good plan."

"Think we found what we were looking for?" Ansel asked.

"Impossible to tell on this side," the woman replied. "But it's a large sample. I expect we have what we need. It should add up to quite a take."

"It's too early to count money," Ansel said. "Slaves captured are not slaves delivered. We sank most of our funds into this operation. I'll celebrate when the cargo has been sold."

Men tossed bones down the manhole. Cole did not hear them landing. Lastly, the redhead and a scarred man with long blond hair lowered the great

skull down the hole, disappearing with it.

Soon only Ansel and the woman remained. Ansel's eyes swept the room. Cole felt the urge to lower the edge of the curtain, but he realized that a hasty movement might draw the eye. He held still, trusting that his face was tucked far enough back into the shadows to escape observation.

"Are we finished?" the woman asked.

Ansel checked his pocket watch. "Just over six minutes left." He gazed around the room again. "Doesn't matter how we leave the place. Nobody can follow us. We're done here."

She climbed down the manhole, and he followed. "Do we cover it?" her voice asked from out of sight.

"No need."

Cole waited. The room became silent. Were they really gone? Seemed like it. What would change in six minutes? Were they bombing the sewer tunnel? Closing it off somehow? Were they really going to sell all those kids into slavery?

In a far corner of the room a little girl crawled out from under a heap of curtains. She was small and skinny, with wavy auburn hair and freckles. She was dressed as an angel. Her wings had crumpled, and her tinsel halo was askew.

The girl looked around furtively. She approached the manhole cautiously and peered down. Then she turned for the stairs.

"Hey," Cole called.

The girl whirled and jumped, her face contorting with fear. Cole came out from under his curtains. She stared at him in shock and wonder, as if he must

be a mirage. “You hid too?” she asked.

“By accident,” Cole said. “I got lucky.”

“I was part of a big group,” the girl explained. “I ran for the corner and hid behind the curtains. Nobody noticed me. When the curtains came down, they covered me. I watched three groups get nabbed after I came here. You were with the last group.”

“Right,” Cole said.

“I wanted to warn you guys, but it was too late. They would have gotten me too.”

“Once we came down the stairs, we were doomed,” Cole said. “My friend heard them lock the door. He had a bad feeling about it, but I ignored him. And now . . .” He gestured at the hole.

“What do we do?” the girl asked.

Cole shrugged. “I don’t know. You don’t have a phone, do you?”

She shook her head.

“It sounded like they sent away the guys upstairs.”

The girl nodded.

Cole looked at the manhole. “They didn’t think they could be followed.”

“I didn’t understand why not,” the girl said. “A lot of what they said didn’t make sense. Where could they sell kids as slaves?”

“Some foreign country, I guess,” Cole said. He walked to the open manhole and stared down. Rungs descended as far as he could see, which was not very far. It got dark quickly.

“Look,” Cole said. “Why don’t you go for help? Call the police. I’ll go down and see if I can figure out where they’re going.”

“They’ll catch you,” the girl warned, her eyes wide. “They’re fast and strong. You should come with me.”

Cole folded his arms across his chest. She might be right. Then again, she was probably scared and wanted company. The kidnappers had seemed confident of escape. They had a ton of kids! They had Dalton! They had Jenna! “I’ll be careful. I’ll follow at a distance. I won’t get too close.”

The girl shrugged. “Up to you.”

Cole looked around the room. There were a couple of windows on one side. “Don’t go up the stairs. Use the windows. Break the glass if you have to, and run.”

“Good idea,” she agreed. “In case those other guys haven’t left yet.”

“What’s your name?” Cole asked.

“I’m Delaney.”

“I’m Cole Randolph. Tell the police where I went. Tell them they have to hurry.”

She nodded and ran over to one of the windows. Cole started down the hole. If he stepped lightly, the metal rungs were reasonably quiet. Of course, for anybody staring up from the bottom he was probably silhouetted against the light above. But the kidnappers hadn’t seemed like they intended to wait around. Besides, they had brought lanterns down with them. If they were still within view, he would see their lights below instead of the darkness.

Cole heard nothing as he descended. The space around him grew black. He looked up at the circle of light above him.

Suddenly his foot couldn’t find the next rung. He looked down and kicked around. There was nothing. The rungs simply stopped.

The kidnappers had told everyone to jump from the last rung. They had all come down here. The drop had to be relatively safe. How far would he fall? He could only see shapeless blackness below.

Cole peered up at the circle of light again. It wasn't too late to head back up. But what if he saw something that could save everybody? The license plate of a truck, or the tunnel the kidnappers took. If they had lights and he was in darkness, they would be easy to follow and he would be hard to see. He had to try. He couldn't desert his best friend and the prettiest girl he knew.

He tried not to imagine Jenna hugging him and calling him her hero. The thought embarrassed him, but it also helped confirm his decision.

Leaning away from the rungs, Cole dropped into the darkness.

## CHAPTER

## 3

# RESCUE

**C**ole was braced to land within a few feet, but instead he kept falling through darkness, picking up speed. Air whistled past him. With growing alarm he tried to prepare for a serious impact. Intuition suggested he might want to keep his body loose. Had the others who climbed down here all died? Was he about to join a pile of corpses? Could there be water at the bottom? With water he might fare better if he kept his body rigid and entered straight.

His speed kept increasing. He tucked his arms against his chest. At this velocity, simply clipping the wall would cause major injuries. Could there be an airbag at the bottom? If so, he should probably land on his back. He could hardly believe how far he was falling! He was going to die! Even if water waited at the bottom, nobody could survive a drop like this.

Glancing up he saw only darkness. Same when he looked down. His speed was no longer increasing. Only the air rushing by confirmed he remained in motion. Then the air stopped rushing, as if he were falling through nothing.

For a moment he became so violently nauseated that he lost all awareness of his other senses. It felt like his stomach was being folded inside out. He clenched his teeth to avoid releasing a stream of vomit.

The nausea departed as quickly as it had arrived. He felt dizzy. A severe ache blossomed behind the midpoint of his forehead.

It took a moment for Cole to realize that he was no longer falling. He was seated on the ground. When had he landed? Dimly realizing that his eyes were closed, he opened them.

He was seated on scorched dirt, encircled by a symmetrical ring of twelve stone pillars. Sparse brush grew here and there, as if the land lacked the fertility to support abundant weeds. Uneven brown plains extended in all directions. Near and far, lonely trees grew at random, like the haphazard survivors of a plague-ravaged forest. The sun had set, bathing the lonely prairie in soft twilight.

The kidnappers were not far off, backlit by the glowing horizon, loading the kids into horse-drawn cages. In the foreground, between two of the pillars, a hooded figure faced away from Cole, observing the activity.

Cole could hardly believe he was uninjured. A fall like he had experienced should have pulverized his bones. Apparently, none of the others had been hurt either. He could see the muscular redhead and the scarred blond man lugging the huge skull between them.

The brown landscape was unfamiliar. Cole knew of nowhere near his town where the terrain looked like this. He had never seen this ring of tall gray pillars. He looked up. There was only sky. How could dropping down a



manhole deposit him on a barren prairie? Yet here he sat. Something weird had happened, something inexplicable.

Holding his breath and staying low, Cole scuttled sideways, hoping to take cover behind one of the pillars. As he got closer, he noticed the pillar was textured like bark, and in a flash he realized the pillars were petrified trees.

On the far side of the fossilized tree, Cole sat with his back to the stone. The petrified trunk was wide enough to conceal him. If nobody came to this side of the tree circle, he might not be discovered. But then what? How had he gotten here? How could he get back to the manhole and the basement?

Motion off to one side caught his eye. The hooded, robed figure had moved into view. The person continued to stare toward the kidnappers, but he clearly addressed Cole. "You are a surprise." The male voice was somewhat deep, the words enunciated clearly, the tone neither menacing nor friendly.

"Please don't give me away," Cole asked quietly.

"The slavers have their quarry," the man said, still not looking at him. "They told me not to expect anyone else. The way closed right after you came through."

"What way?" Cole asked. "Where am I?"

"Far from home." There was a hint of pity behind the words. "You have crossed over to the Outskirts."

"The outskirts of where?"

"A difficult question. The outskirts of everywhere, perhaps. Certainly the outskirts of the world you know. This is an in-between place."

The man was showing no hostility. He showed no fear of the kidnappers, either. He stood in plain sight. Cole felt wary, but he needed information.

“How do I get back?”

“You don’t. It is hard to find the Outskirts, but much harder to truly leave.”

“Who are you?”

“I am a Wayminder. I help control access to the Outskirts.”

“Can’t you send me home? And my friends, too? Those guys kidnapped them.”

“I will not be able to open a way here for months. I have overtaxed my influence in this place. Others of my order would be able to accomplish the feat sooner. The slavers paid me well to open this way.”

“You opened it for them?” Cole sputtered, unable to hide his anger.

“Harvesting slaves from outside the boundaries is no crime,” the Wayminder said. “Not anymore. The High King of the five kingdoms supports it.”

“What if I pay you?” Cole asked. “You know, like the slavers did. Could you open a way for me?”

“Not in this location for some time,” the Wayminder said. “Elsewhere, perhaps. But your problem involves more than simply opening a way. Once you have come to the Outskirts, you will inevitably be drawn back here. The pull is considerably stronger if this is your birthplace, but once you have visited, all roads tend to lead you back.”

Cole could hardly believe what he was hearing. “So even if I make it home, I’ll end up here again?”

“Most likely within hours of your departure.”

“This can’t be happening.”

“I sympathize with your disorientation. Be grateful that you did not come here as a slave.”

“They took my friends. I wanted to help them.”

“Your friends are beyond any aid you could offer. They have been claimed by the slavers. They will be sold.”

Cole was nervous about the next question. He worried that mentioning his vulnerability could end the unspoken truce, but he needed to know what the Wayminder intended to do with him. “You’re not going to turn me over to them?”

“I am no slaver, and I no longer work for the slavers. They paid me to open a way. I performed my duty. I held the way open for the agreed duration. Now the way is closed. Our arrangement was specific and temporary. You came through on your own. They presently have no claim on you. Nor do I. But if they catch you unmarked, they can take ownership of you.”

“Unmarked?”

“Slaves bear a mark. The freeborn bear a different mark. Without a mark, the slavers could still claim you. Not all slaves hail from outside our boundaries.”

“Can I get marked as free?” Cole asked.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Many places, none of them close at hand. The nearest would probably be the village of Keeva. You would present yourself to a needle master. Any unmarked person can request a freemark. Naturally, you would have to avoid

any slavers on your way there. Until you bear a freemark, any slaver given half a chance would promptly label you as their property.”

“My friends will all be slaves?”

“If the slavers brought your friends here, their fates are sealed.”

Cole tried to digest the information. He had thought he was following his friends into a sewer. Getting stranded in a desolate, magical prairie was a lot more than he had bargained for. Had he really left the world he knew behind? Was he really stuck here? If so, should he abandon his friends and run off to a village to get a mark that would protect him from slavery? If he fled, would he ever find his friends again?

“Will you help me?” Cole asked.

“I won’t turn you in,” the Wayminder replied. “I have no reason to do you harm. It costs me little to answer a question or two. But you will have to make your own way. Traveling with an unmarked person is a dangerous business. I have my own affairs to worry about.”

“I need to save my friends,” Cole said.

“Do not cross slavers,” the Wayminder warned. “They are already marking the slaves. Your friends are now their property. If you free them, you would be committing a crime. And you would not succeed. These slavers know their trade. If you try to help your friends, you will join them. Wait until darkness falls or the slave wagons roll away, then take your chances on the prairie.”

“Could you help me get to that town?”

“Keeva? You’re on your own, friend. I need to move. If I tarry much longer, I will arouse their suspicions.” Holding both hands behind his back, the Wayminder pointed in a certain direction. “The village is that way. Avoid

people. It will be a tough walk, but less arduous than a life of slavery. Good luck.”

The Wayminder strolled out of view. Cole had never gotten a good look at his face. There had been no eye contact. All he knew was that the Wayminder was reasonably tall and that his hands had been a chocolate brown.

The light was gradually fading. Cole could hear the blurred murmur of distant conversation. He heard horses and an occasional clanging. What should he do? If he was marked a free person, could he someday find his friends and free them? How big was the Outskirts? If he lost sight of the slavers, what were the chances of ever finding them again?

The Wayminder had warned him against a rescue. But maybe the Wayminder was overcautious. He hadn't seemed like the type to stick his neck out for others.

With his back to the petrified trunk, knees bent, Cole hugged his shins. He had no idea how to survive in the wild. Wandering the barren prairie alone, he might die of thirst or starvation before ever finding a village. If he could rescue Dalton, Jenna, and maybe some of the others, they could set off together. Even if he failed and got caught, at least he would be with his friends. And he would have some protection from the wilderness. Maybe he could escape later.

But Cole had not been caught yet. If he was careful, maybe he really could save everyone. He had to think positively.

The light faded. Bright stars adorned the moonless sky. He was no astronomer, but the swirling bands of dense stars above him were

unmistakably grouped in different patterns than the stars back home. Camping in the desert, his dad had once pointed out the Milky Way. The crowded strips of stars above him seemed like multiple Milky Ways, curved galactic arms stretching across the firmament. Several stars glowed in brighter shades of blue and red than he had ever seen.

The only other light came from a number of campfires among the wagons. Using the dark night as cover, Cole crept closer to the camp. By the dancing firelight, he could see the kids in the cages, still in their Halloween costumes. The girls had been separated from the boys. Some were trying to sleep. Others moped, slumping against the bars. A few conversed quietly. He saw Jenna whispering to Sarah. In a different cage, Dalton rested his forehead against his folded hands.

Dalton had noticed the locked door after they had descended the stairs. He had wanted to leave. Not only had Cole shrugged off his friend's concerns, he had suggested the haunted house to Dalton and Jenna in the first place. He had sentenced his friends to slavery. He had to save them.

Not all the wagons looked like cages. Some were more like coaches. A couple looked almost like portable houses, with humble decorations and quaint windows in the sides.

Cole waited. A single sentry circled the camp, strolling through the gloom beyond the firelight. The first sentry had been the scarred man with blond hair. Now it was Ham. Nobody else seemed concerned about security. Cole watched as the slavers joked and ate. He never glimpsed Ansel, but he saw the woman go in and out of one of the homier-looking wagons. Maybe she had been talking with him. The other kidnappers were all present, except the

guy with the head of a wolf. In addition, Cole noticed at least four men he had not seen earlier. They must have stayed behind with the wagons.

The slavers eventually bedded down—some in wagons, some under wagons, some on the open ground. Most of the kids fell asleep. But not all. Dalton leaned against the bars of his cage, staring vacantly at the dwindling light of the nearest campfire. The sight made Cole blink away tears. His friend did not deserve to be chained up in a portable cage like a circus animal.

The camp fell silent. The muscular redhead took over as sentry. He paced around in lazy circles, eyes studying the empty night. Empty except for Cole, huddled in a low depression at what he hoped was a safe distance.

Cole tried to form a plan. It was hard from this far. Presumably, the cages were locked. He had seen no keys. Nobody had gone in or out of the cages since he had started spying on the camp.

He couldn't do anything from where he was hiding. He needed to either risk moving in closer or try his luck finding the village of Keeva. Looking away from the campfires, Cole considered the empty gloom of the prairie. He could not wander off into the night alone and abandon his friends. It was his fault they were stuck here.

Cole waited for the sentry to walk around to the far side of the camp, then hurriedly approached in a crouch. He raced for the cage that held Dalton. His friend and a couple of other boys perked up as they saw him coming. Cole had carefully observed that none of the kidnappers had crawled under that particular wagon to sleep. With a finger to his lips, he dove into the concealing shadows.

“Cole?” Dalton whispered in disbelief.

Cole could barely hear his friend, but he still worried the greeting had been too loud. He had to respond. He needed info. But he waited a moment to be sure the camp remained still.

Sitting up, Cole put his mouth near one of the cracks in the plank floor of the cage. “I came through to this place on my own. I’m here to bust you out. Are the cages locked?”

“Yes,” Dalton whispered through the same crack. “Ham has the key. The guy who first greeted us in the basement.”

“I remember him,” Cole said. Ham had gone into one of the coaches. “I saw where he went to sleep. I’ll try to steal the key.”

“Are you nuts?” Dalton asked.

“Not so loud,” Cole urged.

“They’ll catch you, too. You should run for it.”

“No,” another voice chimed in. “Get us out.”

“Shut it,” a third voice whispered urgently.

The boys above fell silent. Cole heard footsteps approaching. His body went rigid. He tried to breathe silently. Boots and legs became visible.

“What’s all the commotion?” the redhead inquired in a rough whisper.

“Nothing,” one of the boys answered.

“They were trying to take my coat,” Dalton improvised quietly.

“Keep it down or I’ll confiscate it,” the redhead threatened. “It’s time to sleep.”

“Just wait until my dad catches up,” one of the boys said. “He’s a cop.”

The redhead gave a weary chuckle. “There is no way from there to here. Your parents won’t even remember you. No more noise. I don’t want to come



over here again.”

“Sorry,” Dalton said.

“Don’t apologize,” the redhead said. “Just stop talking.”

“Excuse me,” a girl called softly from a neighboring wagon.

“That goes for all of you,” the redhead snapped, barely maintaining his whisper.

“I just thought you might want to know about the boy hiding under the wagon,” the girl replied.

Cole felt like he had suddenly been immersed in ice water.

The boots shuffled. “What?”

“Ansel told us we would be punished for not telling what we know,” the girl said. “A boy under that wagon is planning an escape.”

The redhead crouched and met eyes with Cole. “Well, who have we here?”

Cole tried to force words from his throat. It took a second. “Me? I’m a free citizen looking for work.”

“Free, you say?” The man chuckled. “I can see your wrist, lad. Free for the moment perhaps. Not for long.”

## CHAPTER

## 4

# BONDMARK

**C**ole knew he had to get away, but for a moment the shock of discovery held him paralyzed. His only chance was to run. They were on an empty prairie at night. If he went far enough, fast enough, maybe the kidnapers would lose him.

When the crouching redhead reached under the wagon, Cole rolled the opposite way. Springing to his feet, he took off, passing other wagons and jumping a sleeping figure bundled in a worn blanket.

“Intruder!” went up the alarm from the redhead. “On your feet! Intruder! Don’t let him get away!”

The shouted words fed Cole’s panic. Men all around the encampment cast aside their covers and scrambled to their feet. Racing toward the open prairie, Cole saw two men running parallel to him and a little ahead, gradually converging. Both were faster than him. If he kept going straight, they would have him, so he abruptly doubled back, hoping to streak through the camp and shake them in the confusion.

The change in direction only revealed the redhead coming at him from behind, along with several others. Lacking better options, Cole swerved toward the nearest wagon, grabbed the bars, and climbed on top. The fingers of the redhead brushed his heel but failed to grab him.

Crouched atop the wooden roof of the wagon, Cole couldn't see his pursuers, but he could hear them coming from all directions. Cole had never been the fastest runner, but he was a confident climber. Heights had never bothered him. There was another wagon parked not too far away. With a running start, he jumped to the next roof, barely clearing the gap.

“He’s moving!” shouted a gruff voice.

Cole ran across the wagon and leaped to the roof of another, landing in a sprawl, one cheek against the splintery wood. Rising to his knees, he realized that he had reached the end of the line. Unless he turned around, there was no other wagon within range.

“Still on the move!” a voice boomed. “He’s on this one!”

If he stayed put, they would take him. Cole ran and jumped from the roof as far as he could. As the ground rushed up to greet him, he saw men coming at him from off to one side. Cole tried to land running but flopped painfully forward into the dirt instead, the impact jarring his bones. Driven by adrenalized panic, he scrambled to his feet just in time for a large body to tackle him from behind.

All the air whooshed from his lungs as Cole was pinned beneath the bulk of a large man who stank of leather and sweat. Cole squirmed, but calloused hands held him firmly. Dirt filled his mouth, and a thorny weed prickled against his temple. Other men gathered around him.

Then the men hushed one another. A light approached, accompanied by footsteps. Craning his neck, Cole saw Ansel, a lantern in one hand. He wore his wide-brimmed hat, a long underwear shirt, pants with suspenders, and a dusty pair of boots. In his other hand he held a sickle. Cole closed his eyes, dread coiling inside.

The boots halted a pace away from Cole's face. "What have we here?" that dry voice asked.

Cole opened his eyes and kept silent.

"Found him under a wagon," the redhead reported. "Must've slipped into camp."

Ansel crouched down, setting the lantern on the ground. The nearby brightness made it hard to see Ansel's face. "Time to fess up, Scarecrow. Slipped into camp from where?"

"Just passing through," Cole tried.

"One of the girls said he was planning an escape," the redhead volunteered.

"She ratted him out?" Ansel asked.

"Sure did," the redhead said.

Ansel nodded. "Good for her. She might make a go of it here. That little darling deserves a reward. We have any of those cookies left? The frosted ones?"

"A few," a voice answered.

"She gets them all," Ansel said. "Give her the royal treatment the rest of the way to Five Roads. First served, largest helpings, front wagon—whatever we can do to make her comfortable."

Cole hoped the cookies would give her food poisoning. But he kept his mouth shut.

Ansel stood, picking up the lantern. “Let him up.”

The man let go of Cole and got off him. A rough hand grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him to his feet. Ansel studied him through eyes so narrow, they almost looked closed.

“Were you planning to steal my slaves, Scarecrow?”

Cole glanced at the sickle—the wicked curve of the blade, the sharp point. He wasn’t sure what this guy wanted to hear. “You took my friends.”

“You’re from over there,” Ansel said. “From outside. You came through with us. How’d you slip away?”

Cole didn’t want to tell Ansel that he had come through after them. The Wayminder had helped him, and Cole worried the truth might get him in trouble. “In the confusion, I hid behind one of the stone trees.”

Ansel glanced at his men. “I’m less than overjoyed to hear that. We had people in place to prevent that kind of sloppiness as we welcomed you to your new home.”

“Where are we?”

Ansel grinned. Not a happy grin. It was the grin of a killer who knew the police would never find the body. “That’s the question, now, isn’t it? See, we’re not in Arizona anymore. We’re not on Earth. I’m no astronomer, but this might not even be the same universe as Earth. We’re in the Outskirts. Junction, specifically, between the five kingdoms.”

“And that means you can kidnap people?”

Ansel glanced at his men. "Scarecrow has the right questions." The lantern swung a little, squeaking. "In Arizona, yes, I stole your friends, and in those parts they might find me guilty. Your problem is, we're not there no more. Once we reached the Outskirts and marked those kids, they became our property according to the law of the land here. And by trying to take my property, Scarecrow, well, you made yourself a criminal."

Cole felt sick. How could they accuse him of wrongdoing for trying to help his kidnapped friends? Everything was upside down. "I don't know the laws here."

Ansel chuckled, and his grin almost became sincere. "Wouldn't that be nice, fellas, if you only had to keep the laws you knew about? I'd spend my life traveling, and I'd stay as ignorant as possible." He eyed Cole up and down. "You working alone?"

Cole almost laughed. "You guys better watch it. My backup will be here any second."

Ansel became expressionless in a scary way. "That wasn't an answer. One more try. You working alone?"

Cole nodded. "Yeah. I'm alone. Nobody else got away."

"If you lie to me . . . that'll be it."

"I'm not lying." They stared at each other in silence for a moment. "What are you going to do with me?"

The grin returned, cunning this time. "You tell me, Scarecrow."

Cole swallowed. All eyes watched him expectantly. "I become a slave?"

Ansel held his sickle higher, his eyes caressing the blade. "My vote was to take away your hands and feet as an example. Slavers can't have people

swiping their merchandise. Bad for business. But . . . Scarecrow . . . you caught me in a good mood. How often does that happen, fellas?"

All the other men found someplace else to look.

Ansel stepped closer to Cole. "Notice how they don't answer? Well, that's your answer. But we made a fine haul tonight, best in a long while, so I'm going to grant your wish and take you as a slave." He raised his voice, calling over his shoulder. "Secha? Tag him! He'll walk behind the rear wagon tomorrow. No food or water. We'll let him keep his extremities, but that don't mean we got to coddle the boy. Show's over. Now let's get settled again. We start our march in the morning."

Ansel retreated several paces, boots crunching over the dry ground. The woman who had eaten the cockroach approached with a lantern of her own. She held it out toward Cole. "You're the one that swung your bag at the lantern."

Cole nodded.

She gave him a penetrating stare. Cole glanced away.

"Look me in the eye, young man," Secha said.

He stared at her. She leaned in close, never breaking eye contact. Her fingers contorted into weird positions. Then she examined his hands front and back.

"Worst of the lot," she said. "No shaping potential at all. The High King won't pay a lead ringer for this one."

Ansel shook his head. "Had I known that, I would have made an example of him."

"Still could," Secha said over her shoulder.

“Nah, I already passed judgment. Following the wagon will suffice.” Ansel walked off.

“Be glad I’m not in charge,” Secha told Cole. “I would have fed you to Carnag.”

“What’s Carnag?” Cole asked.

The men guarding him chuckled at his ignorance.

Secha frowned. “Depends who you ask. The reports are mixed. But consensus has it that Carnag is a monster like we’ve never seen anywhere in the five kingdoms. People are scared. We’re not too far from Sambria, where the monster has been prowling.”

“You’re right,” Cole said. “I’m glad you’re not in charge.”

“Let’s get the bondmark on you so I can turn in,” Secha said. “Hold out your hand.”

Cole briefly considered resistance. But two men stood right behind him. For all he knew, if he made a fuss, Ansel would return with his sickle. Cole extended his left hand.

Secha produced a drawstring bag and opened the mouth. The third finger on her left hand had an extra long nail. She dipped it into the bag.

“Hold still,” she told Cole, then turned to one of the men. “Help him.”

One of the slavers grabbed Cole’s arm just above the wrist. The other man braced himself against Cole from behind. Cole clenched his teeth. If they were holding him like this, it meant the mark was going to hurt. He tried to ready himself for the pain.

When her fingernail touched his wrist, it felt extremely hot and cold at the same time. He wanted to yank his hand away, but the brawny redhead held



him tightly. Secha moved her lips as she traced a simple pattern with her fingernail. Then she backed away. The bondmark she had drawn blazed an angry red. It still felt hot and cold, though not as intensely as when her nail was in contact with his skin.

“Try not to touch it,” Secha advised. “You’ll slow the healing.” She turned and strode away.

With a viselike hand on his shoulder, the redhead marched Cole over to the rear of one of the cages and chained him to it with a tight manacle on his unmarked wrist.

“Not a sound,” the redhead threatened. “We’ll reorganize the slaves according to value in the morning. The best go up front. You’ll walk behind the last wagon. Better sleep. Long day tomorrow.”

The redhead walked away. Cole didn’t know any of the kids in this wagon. They were pretending to be asleep, but he had seen two of them peek at him.

Cole got down on the ground. He had no blanket. The earth was lumpy and hard. The chain wasn’t long enough to let his hand rest on the ground, and his wrist dangled about four inches up.

He couldn’t see Dalton or Jenna. Their wagons were lost in shadows, and he had no desire to draw more attention to himself by calling out to them.

The night grew quiet again except for the pop and crackle of the campfires. Less than half an hour ago, Cole had watched the camp from a distance. Many options had been open to him. He wished he could rewind time and do it over again, but it was too late. Now he was a slave like the others.

What kind of slave would he be? Would he labor in mines, busting open rocks with a pickax? Would he row slave ships? Would he work farms? Would he fight in a gladiator arena? All of the above? None? He expected he would have answers sooner than he wanted. Cole closed his eyes and tried to relax, but sleep was a long time coming.

## CHAPTER

## 5

# CARAVAN

**T**he next day got worse with every step. Chained to the rear wagon, Cole had more dust to deal with than any other member of the procession. The kids in the cages got dusty as well, but at least they could turn their backs to it. Cole found that by staying really close to his wagon, squinting his eyes, keeping his head down, and covering his nose and mouth with his unchained hand, he could avoid enough of the dust to remain on his feet. Some stretches of the way proved dustier than others.

Most of the time he had to maintain a fast walk to keep up with the wagon. The mounted guards wouldn't let him hold the bars of the cage, but he stayed close enough to touch them. At a certain distance from the wagon, the chain would help pull him along, but it also threatened to tug him off balance. Up inclines, the wagon went slower; down slopes, a little faster. The land remained more or less level, without any major hills or valleys.

By the time they broke for lunch, Cole was hungrier and thirstier than he could remember ever feeling. His crusty mouth tasted like he had tried to eat

the prairie.

The wagons formed up into a loose circle. He sat alone while the others ate, his body and legs exhausted. How was he supposed to keep going without food and water? Maybe that was the idea. Maybe he would end up getting dragged to death.

Most of the kids in the wagon avoided eye contact with him. Nobody tried to toss him any food. He couldn't really blame them. They didn't want to end up chained beside him. It was hard to watch them eat and drink. They only had bread and water, but to Cole it seemed like a feast.

Dalton and Jenna were in two of the farthest wagons. He told himself they would try to sneak him food if they weren't so distant. They kept looking his way, so he did his best to act content. He even managed some smiles.

When the wagons started rolling again, Cole's legs were stiff and cramped. Maybe resting hadn't been a great idea. Cole began to wonder if he could last until the end of the day. He didn't look at the guards. He didn't watch the kids in the cage. He didn't check the sun. Head down, he just kept trudging forward.

The afternoon grew warmer. Sweat soaked his scarecrow costume. He had gotten rid of the straw and the arrows, but he wished the sleeves were shorter. At least his hat kept the sun off his face and neck. The inside of his mouth became desiccated. His tongue felt swollen. When he tried to open his mouth, his lips stuck together.

As evening approached, he often stumbled and sometimes fell. If he didn't get up right away, the chain towed him forward. Once, he let the chain drag him a good distance, hoping it might rest his legs. The manacle hurt his wrist

terribly, and he soon realized that if he didn't stay on his feet, the front side of his body would become one huge scab.

While the sunset faded, his head pounded painfully. His tongue felt like an old sponge that had become rigid. No strength remained in his rubbery legs, but he trudged onward, because the alternative was worse.

When the wagon came to a halt, Cole collapsed and promptly lost consciousness. He awoke with Ham trickling water into his mouth from a canteen, a little at a time. Warm and metallic, it still somehow managed to taste heavenly. A little food followed—fragments of bread, accompanied by some more water.

“Learn your lesson yet?” Ham asked when Cole met his gaze.

Not trusting his voice, Cole nodded.

“Want to join the rest of the slaves in the wagon?” Ham asked.

“Yes, please,” Cole croaked.

“Boss asked after you,” Ham said. “I told him you might not last another day on foot.”

Cole nodded. Ham was probably right.

“Boss never goes easy on thieves,” Ham said. “But you only tried. You never got away with nothing. And you're his now. Boss likes to turn a profit when he can. Nobody buys dead slaves. I expect he'll load you in a cage.”

“Hope so,” Cole managed. Ham gave him a little more water.

“You'll sleep chained here tonight,” Ham said. “Get some shut-eye.”

As Ham walked away, Cole slumped down and closed his eyes. The ground was lumpy, the camp was noisy, but falling asleep was no problem.



In the cool twilight before dawn, Ham used a key to unfasten the manacle. Cole tenderly rubbed where his wrist had been scraped and bruised. He stood unsteadily, his legs stiff and sore. Following instructions, he entered the rear wagon's cage. Breakfast consisted of a crumbly biscuit and a strip of tough dried meat. He drank gritty water from a dirty tin cup, then collected and ate all the crumbs shed by the biscuit.

After the wagon started rolling, Cole curled up and slept, heedless of the jolts and vibrations of the uneven terrain. When he woke, all horizons were a bright orange, as if multiple suns were rising in every direction.

"What's with the sky?" he asked.

"Been that way for hours," a girl said quietly. She wore bloody scrubs, as if she came from a horribly botched surgery.

"Where are they taking us?" Cole asked.

"Someplace to sell us," the girl said. "I guess some of the kids are going to the king or something. They kept talking about shaping potential."

"Shhh," hissed a boy dressed like a commando. "We're not supposed to talk."

Surgeon girl looked guilty. Cole glanced around but didn't see anyone who was likely to overhear them. A couple of the men roved up and down the caravan on horseback, however none were currently nearby. The wagon was noisy, and the driver didn't seem to be paying attention. Still, Cole could understand commando boy not wanting to make a bad situation worse. The eight kids in this cage had all watched him stumble along behind the wagon yesterday. None would be eager to risk trying it.

Cole settled back and gazed at the sky through the bars. There had been a sun yesterday, so what was with the weird lighting? Surgeon girl must have been mistaken. The sky couldn't have been like this for hours.

But as the wagon rumbled onward, the sky stayed the same, as if the sun were about to rise or had recently set in all directions. The other kids all kept their heads down. No one tried to whisper to anyone else.

Leaning against the bars with his back to the dust, Cole thought about home. His mom and dad were probably out of their minds. Even his sister, Chelsea, was probably worried.

And he wasn't the only person missing. All the parents had to be freaking out. That many kids disappearing without a trace would make the news for sure. Cole had never heard a story to top it.

The redheaded guard had thought their parents would forget them. Maybe people in this weird place would let their kids disappear without a fight. Obviously the guard had no idea how things worked in America.

Cole hoped the little angel girl had made it to the police. Assuming she had, there was no way even the best detective could follow their trail to another dimension. Her story would just make the disappearances more mysterious.

Looking around at the barren prairie and glancing ahead at the other kids locked up like circus animals, Cole realized he might never make it home. If he did, according to the Wayminder he wouldn't get to stay there.

What had been his last words to his family? He clearly recalled his final remark to his sister. Chelsea was two years older and considered herself an expert on maturity. Just before he left to meet up with Dalton, she had been

getting dressed up for a Halloween party. As he was leaving, she informed him how immature he was for going trick-or-treating. He told her she looked like something Halloween had thrown up.

He felt bad for it now, although it was better than having no comeback. He wondered if Chelsea would think disappearing forever was immature.

His last words to his mom were assurances he would be home by nine thirty. His dad had asked him to take out the trash, and he had promised to do it later. He hadn't lied to them on purpose.

Maybe he would see them again. But somehow, as he rattled along a lonely prairie in a world where a stationary sunrise glowed in all directions, he had a hard time believing it.

He tried to look ahead and spot Dalton or Jenna, but with so much dust, and with the wagons in single file, he could seldom see much beyond the wagon in front of him. He wondered if they were looking for him.

Brown prairie, more or less level, stretched in all directions. Cole saw weeds and brush and some isolated trees, but not much else. He decided that if he'd wanted to be bored by nature, he had come to the right place.

Staring down at the floorboards of the cage, Cole noticed where somebody had carved a happy face into the wood. It was simple—a circle with two dots for eyes and a curved smile. The circle was imperfect, but not bad considering it had been scratched into wood.

The face struck him as odd. "Who would draw a smiley face while riding in a slave wagon?" he muttered.

"Somebody who wanted company," the happy face answered in a friendly voice. "The miles go by faster when you have a buddy." The mouth didn't



open when it spoke, but it quivered.

Cole jumped in surprise. He glanced over at the other kids in the wagon. Nobody was paying attention to him. He stared at the smiley face. "Did you just talk?" he whispered.

"Sure did," the face answered, mouth trembling again. "I'm happy as a clam to meet a nice guy like you."

The voice wasn't very loud and sounded like a young boy.

Cole rubbed his face with both hands. Was he dreaming? Hallucinating? Surgeon girl was sitting closest to him. He crawled over to her and tapped her shoulder. "Check something for me."

"What?" she asked, glancing around for guards.

Cole had already looked. One rider was way behind them, and two others roved much farther up the line of wagons. He motioned her over to the happy face. She followed uncertainly. "Say something to her," Cole instructed.

"Today is the bestest day ever to make a new friend," the cheerful face said.

The girl blinked, then looked at Cole in surprise. "How'd you do that? Are you a ventriloquist?"

"Yeah," Cole said. "Cool trick, right?"

She rolled her eyes. "What's the matter with you? Does this seem like a good time for jokes?" She scooted back to her former position.

Cole hunched down with his head near the happy face. He put his hand up to cover his lips. "Do you mind talking quietly?"

“Not a smidge,” the face said at a lower volume, although still chipper.  
“I’m just glad as can be to have a new pal.”

“What are you?” Cole asked. “How are you talking?”

“I’m a semblance, silly. I was shaped to talk.”

“A what?”

“I was made by Liam, the superdy-duperest shaper in all the land. After he was taken as a slave, he made me to keep him company. When he got sold, he left me here to cheer up anyone who talked to me. Feeling better yet?”

Cole could hardly believe he was talking to a magical happy face. It seemed even weirder to him than slave traders from another world. The little guy was so enthusiastic, Cole couldn’t help feeling a bit better. “Yeah, actually. Do you have a name?”

“Happy.”

“I’m Cole. Can you see me?”

“Sure, silly billy. I can see up your nostrils.”

Cole stifled a chuckle. He glanced at the other kids, but they all sat with their heads bowed, wrapped up in their fears.

“Does it hurt if people step on you?”

“Not a bit. You stepped on me when you came in here.”

“Sorry.”

“No harm done. You have a good sole.”

Cole smiled for Happy’s benefit. “You said the kid who made you was a shaper. Did he shape you with a knife?”

“No, silly, with his shaping.”

“What? Like magic?”

“Kind of, I guess. Life is magical.”

“He brought you to life?”

“Not really. I’m a semblance. I seem alive, don’t I?” The face gave a squeaky giggle.

“Did Liam program your words?”

“I just say what I say, Liam showed me the way, in this cage I will stay, while you’re here, we should play.”

Cole wondered whether Liam or the little face had created the rhyme. “Do you feel alive?”

“I love to talk, especially with a special new friend.”

The face seemed mostly designed to act friendly. Cole wanted to check if it could tell him anything useful. “Why is the sky like this? Why does it look like sunrise everywhere?”

“We’re lucky it’s a duskday—not too hot, not too cold. It’s nice to feel glad about the weather.”

“Are there lots of duskdays here?”

“They come and go. It depends. Are you from outside?”

“Outside of this place? I’m from Earth. These guys kidnapped my friends.”

“Don’t let greedy slavers keep you down. Whenever you fall, remember to bounce!”

“Listen, Happy. Can you help me get out of here?”

“I’d surely help if I could. I’m just a face on some wood.”

Cole glanced around to make sure nobody was noticing his conversation. No guards were near, and the other kids still ignored him. “You’ve been here a long time. Maybe you know something that could help me.”

“You bet I do,” Happy chirped. “Here’s a good one: If at first you don’t succeed, another chance is all you need!”

“I mean info about the slavers,” Cole said. “Or about this wagon. Secrets that might be useful to help me get away.”

Happy giggled nervously. “Don’t try to get away. It makes them very grumpy. You’ll get to leave when they sell you.”

“Where will they sell me?”

“The slave market at Five Roads.”

“What kind of people might buy me?”

“The kind with money, silly. The kind who need slaves.”

“What sort of work will I do?”

“You never know, but you can always hope for the best. You might get to do something really amazing!”

Happy didn’t seem like a fountain of useful information. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re saying I should never stop chasing that rainbow?”

The smile widened. “That’s the spirit! Follow a star! Keep your chin up and you’ll go far.”

“Do the slavers know about you?”

“The Shaper does, Secha. She told Ansel. They spoke with me one night. I’m tricky to remove, so they let me be.”

“Secha is a Shaper?” Cole asked.

Happy giggled. “She marked you, didn’t she?”

Cole remembered her tracing on his wrist with her fingernail. He looked at the maroon mark. “Does it talk?”

Happy laughed hard. “Your bondmark? That isn’t even a semblance!”

“Why would it be tricky for them to remove you?”

“Liam wanted me to stick. If I get destroyed or removed, I take shape elsewhere on the wagon. They’d have to scrap the whole wagon to get rid of me.”

“Can you move on your own?” Cole wondered.

One of the eyes flattened in a wink. “Just a little.”

Cole traced the circle of the happy face with his fingertip. Happy laughed as if it tickled. How could such a thing have been created? “What else can shapers do?”

“It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On what they want to make, silly! And whether they can.”

Cole sighed. Happy was cheerful, and it was unbelievable he existed, but prying anything useful from him was exasperating.

“Do you know any secrets that will help me survive here?” Cole asked.

“They’re not secrets,” Happy said. “Enjoy the beauty of the sky and keep a twinkle in your eye.”

The wagons came to a stop.

Cole sat up, looking around. He couldn’t see the front of the procession. “What’s going on?”

“We stopped,” Happy said. “Seems early for lunch.”

When they had stopped to eat in the past, the wagons had formed a circle. This time they remained in a line. Was there an obstacle up at the front? Cole couldn’t tell.

After some time Ansel walked away with a man Cole hadn't seen before into a field off to one side. The man was shorter than Ansel, with graying hair and bushy sideburns. He used a cane and walked with a limp. They headed out far enough to be visible from all wagons at once, then turned to face the caravan.

"We've met a customer by chance on the road," Ansel announced, his parched voice even more gravelly when he raised it. "This gentleman works north of here with the Sky Raiders at the Brink. Those names won't mean much to you newcomers, but the Raiders have a heavy need for slave labor, in part because the life expectancy for a new slave among them is around two weeks."

This caused a stir among the caged trick-or-treaters. Ansel waited for the murmuring to die down.

"Our customer was returning from a supply run," Ansel said, "but figured he should take advantage of our encounter by gaining an extra pair of hands. The wagons headed for the royal palace are naturally off limits. Otherwise he can have his pick. Since the slave who goes with him will probably perish shortly, I mentioned the new boy who caused a ruckus the other night. Due to my soft spot for obedience, I denied him Tracy, who pointed out the clumsy thief."

Ansel then led the man directly to Cole's wagon. As they approached, the other kids in the cage crowded away from Cole.

If this stranger bought him, how would he ever find Dalton, Jenna, and the others from his neighborhood? Then again, they would probably all get

sold to different places anyhow. At least this guy seemed kind of old and not too quick on his feet. There might come a chance to escape.

The potential buyer stepped forward and looked up at Cole through the bars. “You’re the boy who caused the commotion?” His clearly enunciated words made him seem professorial. Or maybe it was the slightly battered top hat in his hand.

“Yeah,” Cole replied.

“Any physical handicaps? Chronic illnesses?”

“I’m healthy. A little hungry.”

“We feed them twice what most slaves get,” Ansel inserted. “They’re in prime condition, fresh from a prosperous world.”

The man nodded, eyes still on Cole. “How well do you handle heights?”

Cole wondered whether he should lie. Maybe a fear of heights would disqualify him from the dangerous work Ansel had mentioned. But the buyer looked and acted nice, which was more than Cole could say for the slavers. He decided to see where honesty would lead him. “I’m not scared of heights.”

The man shifted his stance. “How do you feel when standing near a high brink?”

“Doesn’t bother me,” Cole said. “Never has.”

The man turned to Ansel. “Easy as that. I’ll take him.”

## CHAPTER

## 6

# THE BRINK

**T**he quick decision surprised Cole. The buyer turned away, and a tall, muscled stranger came into view, glaring at Cole distrustfully. So much for making an easy escape from the old limping guy. He should have guessed the buyer would have help.

On his way out of the cage, Cole leaned close to surgeon girl. “If you get lonely, talk to the happy face.”

She looked at him like he was crazy.

Cole hopped down to where the tall stranger awaited him. “This way,” the man said, pointing toward the front of the caravan. He had a familiar reddish mark on his wrist.

“Are you a slave too?” Cole asked.

The man cuffed Cole on the ear, hard enough to knock him to the ground. Cole stayed down for a moment, the side of his head smarting and his mind buzzing with anger.

“Don’t speak unless spoken to,” the man said. “Up.”



Cole got to his feet. The kids in the slave wagons watched him with wide eyes. Without an audience, he would have gone quietly. But he didn't want all those kids to see him offering no resistance to a bully. It set a bad precedent.

So he turned and kicked at the side of the stranger's knee as hard as he could. Crouching, the man swiveled, caught Cole's ankle in one hand, and then swept his other foot out from under him with a brisk kick.

Cole's back hit the ground first with a flat slap, and he found himself unable to breathe. Rolling onto his side, he shuddered as he tried to get his paralyzed lungs to kick into gear. He needed air but couldn't inhale. Then the paralysis passed, and he was breathing again. He gratefully took several deep breaths.

"You have any fight left in you?" the tall stranger asked. "I could do this all day."

Cole rocked into a sitting position. A glance at the wagon showed the occupants all pointedly looking elsewhere. He had taught them that defiance led to pain and failure. Not exactly the lesson he'd had in mind.

Cole got up and brushed himself off. The tall guard gestured for him to proceed. "Bye, Happy," Cole called toward the cage.

"Bye" came a faint, high-pitched reply.

Cole noticed several heads in the cage swivel toward the floor.

Well ahead of them now, the buyer limped beside Ansel toward a group of burdened mules at the front of the caravan. "Those your mules?" Cole asked.

The man cuffed Cole on the other ear, not as hard as last time, but enough to make him stagger. "You learn slower than most dogs."

“You didn’t hit me for saying good-bye,” Cole replied.

“I’m not that heartless,” the man said. “No more out of you.”

Cole watched the wagons as he walked. He saw Jenna, her Cleopatra costume filthy and bedraggled. Cole forced a smile and gave her a wave.

“You were brave to come for us,” Jenna called. “Tracy deserves to be run over by every wagon in the line!”

The other kids in her cage distanced themselves from her. She stood by the bars defiantly.

“They’re taking my wagon to the High King,” Jenna called. “Whatever that means.”

“This isn’t over,” Cole promised, ducking just in time to feel the man’s hand whoosh over his head. He had swung hard that time. Cole sprang to the side, barely avoiding a kick, then ran ahead toward the mules.

Something struck the back of his head and sent him tumbling. It was hard to tell whether it had been a fist, a rock, or a club, but it hurt plenty. Cole curled up, cradling his sore skull, worried that more blows might rain down. When none came, he risked a peek. The big man stood over him, frowning, arms folded beneath his chest.

“I misspoke,” the man said. “I’m not willing to do this all day. Act up again, and we’ll have to cart you to the Brink in a wheelbarrow. On your feet.”

Head still throbbing, Cole rose to find Dalton staring at him from behind nearby bars. Heavily powdered by dust and with his frowning makeup smudged and faded, his friend looked like the saddest clown ever. Dalton cautiously shook his head, warning Cole not to speak.

Cole nodded at his friend and mouthed, *I'll find you.*

Dalton waved, tears brimming in his eyes. "We're going to the king too," Dalton said softly, barely loud enough to hear.

Cole looked away. Would he really find them? Or was this the last time he would see anyone from his world? He had been mostly trying to give Dalton a little hope, but he found that he really meant his words. Maybe he would lead a slave revolt. Maybe he would sneak away on his own. It was hard to guess what opportunities he would find, but he silently vowed never to stop watching for a chance to escape and to find his friends.

When Cole reached the mules, the buyer already sat astride a horse. A long-haired man with a shiny burn scar on his chin rode beside him. "Come here, slave," the professorial man invited.

Cole approached the man on the horse.

"I heard you sassing Vidal," the man said. "Don't speak to your betters unless we ask you a question. Is that hard to grasp?"

"I'm a quick learner," Cole said. "All it usually takes is a concussion or two."

The man looked beyond Cole and held up a hand to stay Vidal. "The slave was answering a question." The man returned his gaze to Cole. "A little spirit might serve you well at the Brink. A lot will serve you ill. You're not from here, so our treatment of slaves might seem barbaric, but you had better get used to it. Even if I don't personally cherish certain aspects of slavery, we're teaching you the order of things for your own good. I'm Durny, this is Ed, and we have some riding ahead of us. You're now the property of Adam

Jones, owner of the Cliffside Salvage Yard and leader of the Sky Raiders. Don't make problems, or you'll pay dearly. Understood?"

"I get it," Cole said.

Durny looked to Vidal. "Put him on Maribel. Our business here is done."



By his sixth day of riding, Cole had grown accustomed to Maribel. In spite of her burden, she and the other eleven mules plodded tirelessly forward from daybreak to nightfall. Normal suns had crossed the sky ever since the duskday ended, and today was no exception.

Cole had found the ride lonely. The men tended to converse when he was out of earshot. They only addressed him directly with basic instructions. He had to unpack and brush the mules at night and get them ready to travel every morning.

The cold treatment wore on Cole. He had never felt like such an outcast. After having been marked, chained up, caged, and now ignored as if he was less than a person, Cole had to fight worries that his life was over. He began to doubt whether he would have another happy day.

Today they had started early, in the gray chill before sunrise. Durny had explained that the Brink was dangerous at night and that a long ride should get them to their destination before sunset.

As the day progressed, Cole tried to enjoy the scenery. At least the land had grown more interesting, with ridges, hills, and ravines. Grasses and brush grew everywhere, along with numerous bushes and occasional stands of tall trees. He saw rabbits and squirrels, and occasionally glimpsed deer or foxes.

Cole kept an eye on the sun as it began to sink. Durny had made a point throughout the day of hurrying the mules along, not wanting to end up near the Brink after dark. The sun was less than an hour away from setting when Durny dropped back to ride beside Cole.

“Come with me, slave,” he said. “Let Ed and Vidal tend the mules for a spell.”

Durny dismounted and Cole did likewise. Durny motioned for him to follow, then led him onto a trail and up a rise. Up ahead the trail came to a sudden end at what was clearly a precipice.

Durny nudged Cole’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “You claimed not to mind edges. Why not give that one a try?”

Cole crept to where the ground stopped, and then he leaned forward to look down the cliff.

And down.

And down.

He had never seen anything like it.

He wasn’t looking down at the ground in the distance. He was looking down at sky that darkened toward purple the farther he peered.

Durny came up beside him. “Welcome to the Brink.”

“Permission to speak?”

“Granted.”

“Where’s the bottom?”

Durny shrugged. “Far as anyone can tell, there is no bottom. Expeditions have explored by climbing and flying. No one who ever returned has seen where the cliff bottoms out. It seems to go down beyond infinity.”

“It’s like the end of the world,” Cole said, staring out at the emptiness.

“Exactly.”

Cole glanced at Durny. “The world can’t just end.”

“This one does. At least in this direction. The Brink doesn’t go all the way around the Outskirts, at least as far as we’ve been able to determine.” He waved a hand to the right. “Go far enough in that direction and you’ll reach the Eastern Cloudwall. Can’t go over it, can’t slide under it, can’t dodge around it. Of those who have tried to go through it, none have returned. Same story with the Western Cloudwall, if you follow the Brink in the other direction. What lies behind or within the cloudwalls none can tell, for they cannot be breached by land or air. Notice anything else out there? Look closely.”

Scanning outward from the Brink, all Cole saw were sky and some clouds, the same view he got if he looked up. Wait, on one of the smaller clouds, in the distance, he observed the distinct shape of a castle with several towers.

“That cloud looks just like a castle,” he said, pointing.

“That *is* a castle,” Durny replied.

“It can’t be,” Cole said. “It’s floating.”

“Once again, welcome to the Brink.”

Cole gave Durny a suspicious stare. “You have to be kidding. This place might be weird, but not that weird.”

Durny reached inside his coat and removed a collapsible brass spyglass. Extending it, he raised it to one eye and focused it before passing it to Cole.

Since the spyglass was powerful, it took Cole a frustrating moment to line it up with the castle. Sure enough, the structure appeared to be made of

stone, inexplicably resting on a wisp of cloud with nothing but blue sky all around. It had battlements, banners, towers, windows—even a visible drawbridge.

Cole lowered the spyglass. “How is it possible?”

“Specifically, I have no answer,” Durny said. “Generally, we’re in Sambria. This part of the Outskirts is the most susceptible to deliberate physical tampering. Some things I have seen shaped here make me wonder whether anything is impossible.”

“I’ve heard about shaping,” Cole said. “What is it? Like magic?”

Durny harrumphed. “Any phenomenon we don’t understand seems like magic. To a primitive culture, fire might seem like magic. This spyglass certainly would.”

“Shaping is science?”

“Not exactly. It’s . . . the ability to rearrange things and to imbue them with new qualities. Some people have a knack for it. I have a share of the talent myself. No matter how much talent you have, it’s easier to shape material here in Sambria.”

Cole gazed out across the gulf of sky. “Somebody shaped that castle?”

“Nobody knows who shapes the castles,” Durny said thoughtfully. “They appear out of the Western Cloudwall and drift across into the Eastern Cloudwall. Today is a quiet day. You can often see a dozen or more from a single spot. While the castles migrate from one cloudwall to the other, we salvage what we can.”

“Wait,” Cole said in disbelief. “The Sky Raiders raid the castles?”

“You’re catching on,” Durny approved. “And you’ll be helping us.”

“How do you get to them? Planes? Helicopters?”

“Skycraft. Flying ships.”

“How do they fly?”

Durny glanced toward the sun. “Last question. We need to get indoors before dark. Near the base of the castles are suspensors, commonly called floatstones. They keep the castles aloft. We harvest them from time to time and use them in the construction of skycraft.”

Cole could not believe what he was hearing and seeing. But it was hard to argue with the sight of the castle in the distance. After all, he had crossed over to a mysterious world through a manhole in a spook alley, and he had held a conversation with a happy face. “The job is dangerous? Raiding the castles?”

Durny gave a snort. “I said no more questions, but what do you think? Now come—let’s go meet your owner.”



## CHAPTER

## 7

# SKYPORT

**S**kyport, as Durny named it, came into view just before the sun dipped below the horizon. The Brink was ragged and far from level. They had not paralleled the edge long before finding a shallow basin that looked like half a valley because it ended so abruptly. Skyport was nestled down at the bottom.

Constructed from stone and heavy timbers, the sprawling main building perched right at the edge of the Brink. Several balconies and porches projected out over the drop. To Cole, the structure looked one medium-size earthquake away from tumbling off the end of the world.

There were several smaller outbuildings scattered around, including a stable and a modest barn. A tall wall enclosed a huge area behind the main building, which Cole assumed was the Cliffside Salvage Yard. Between the distance, the bad lighting, and the height of the surrounding barrier, Cole couldn't tell what was inside.

A bell clanged as Durny led the mule train down the gentle slope to Skyport. Men and teens hustled out to help unpack the mules. The people

wore odd clothing. One burly man sported a furry vest. Another had a T-shirt featuring fried-egg eyes above a bacon smile. One of the teens wore a dark-blue military jacket glittering with medals.

Unsure how to contribute, Cole stood off to the side as Durny gave instructions. He noticed men standing guard around the perimeter of the buildings. There were lots of people here and not much cover on the surrounding slopes. Making an escape would be tricky. He couldn't afford to blow it, so he would get to know the area first. If he kept his eyes open, sooner or later the right opportunity would arise.

Before long, Durny came over to him. "This way, slave. Time to meet your master."

Cole followed Durny up wooden steps to a porch. He noticed an ivory rocking chair, a silk hammock, a chest made of solid iron, and a hairy creature, with a head at either end, inside a cage.

There was no time to consider these sights, because Durny pushed through the door into a busy common room. Most everyone was male—the youngest around Cole's age; the oldest, gray-haired or bald. Some of them were eating, some played cards, others sat talking. Slave marks abounded.

Durny led the way to a beefy man with a graying beard and long curly hair, who sat on a cushioned, elaborate throne carved from translucent jade. The magnificent seat would have looked out of place in the saloon-type atmosphere if not for the other odd treasures scattered around the room—a gleaming stack of gold bars, a platinum sarcophagus studded with jewels, an ornate harpsichord, and a stuffed creature much larger and fiercer-looking than any bear.

“It’s about time!” the man boomed. “No more sending our top shaper away on elongafied excursions. Did you see Carnag?”

“No. Saw some refugees. Reports have it well into Sambria, near Riverton.”

“I keep hearing the most outlandish stories. If it heads this way, we’ll help it off the Brink. The trading went well?”

“Very well,” Durny said. “I even acquired some new blood.”

“Are they vending slaves in Mariston these days?”

“We crossed the path of a caravan.”

“You only bought one?”

“I’d used up most of my cash fund, but he’s an interesting candidate. Fresh from Earth.”

The man on the throne shifted his attention to Cole. “How’d you end up here?”

“Slavers kidnapped my friends,” Cole explained. “I wanted to help them.”

“You came through on your own?” Durny asked.

Cole decided there probably wasn’t much reason to hide that detail anymore. “Yeah. I followed them through. I wanted to rescue my friends. You can guess how well it went.”

“You got nabbed.” The man on the throne chuckled, slapping his thigh. “Steep price to pay for helping your mates. Unfortuitous. Well, if a bondmark is your fate, you’ve landed at the right place.”

“Ansel didn’t mention you came here voluntarily,” Durny said.

“I didn’t tell him,” Cole replied.

Durny nodded thoughtfully, then glanced at the man on the throne. “The lad doesn’t mind an edge.”

“I would hope not,” the man blustered. “You have a name?”

“I’m Cole.”

“Adam Jones. I’m the greedy bone-picker who runs this operation. I answer to ‘Your Majesty,’ ‘Your Excellentness,’ and ‘Adam.’ We’ll call you Cole until you earn something better.” Adam looked at Durny. “Did you explain the way of things here?”

“The boy needed to learn his new station,” Durny said.

“Ah, sensible—new slave and whatnot.” Adam focused back on Cole. “A slave won’t find a deal like working as a Sky Raider in most corners of the Outskirts. I was once a slave too. Most of us were. You won’t get typical treatment here. Not from us.” His eyes grew serious. “You’re lucky. You only had the littlemost taste of slave life. Be glad you’ll never really know what you’re missing.”

Cole nodded.

“You’re new, so you’ll have to pay your dues, take some ribbing, perform some distasteful chores. But you won’t always be the greenest recruit at Skyport. The more seniority you gain, the better it gets. You can even earn your freedom. The catch? You might die tomorrow.”

Cole had been feeling better until that final statement. “Really?”

“Sky Raiders risk their lives on every mission,” Adam said. “For the first season or two, you’ll serve as a scout, risking your neck more than anyone. Being careful, smart, and quick can help you survive. Still, part of it is the luck of the draw. We lost a good young scout last week.”

“Who?” Durny asked.

“Fiddler.”

Durny made a pained expression. “Too bad.”

“Lively boy of fourteen,” Adam continued. “He’d almost earned his way out of scout service. Takes fifty missions. He was four short. Fiddler came up against something no man could have outrun. His death showed the crew that an unfightable predator occupied the castle. His sacrifice saved lives. It’s noble work. We always need more scouts.” Adam winked. “And now we have one.”

Cole felt sick with dread. Heights were one thing. Monstrous predators like the stuffed superbear in the corner were another. “Do I have to?”

Adam laughed heartily. “What a question! Nobody would volunteer as a scout. You’re a slave until you work it off. This is how you start. There are no other choices. Last long enough, and someday you could become a partner, wealthy and comfortable. Until then, you’ll do your part to embiggen the organization.”

Cole nodded grimly, trying not to let his terror show. “What are my chances?”

Adam looked at him skeptically. “You want a straight answer?”

“I don’t know.”

Adam exploded with laughter. “You’ll be fine! There’s nothing to worry about. One day it’ll be you sitting on this throne.”

Cole frowned. “Wait. Give it to me straight.”

Adam shrugged. “More than half our scouts survive their first ten missions. Maybe one in twenty survive all fifty. But the odds of coming home

the first time are reasonable!”

“I start tomorrow?”

Adam nodded. “Today was slow out there, which oftentimes means the next day will be busy. I’ll want a report about your first outing.”

“How can I prepare?”

“There’s a proper attitude!” Adam said. “Durny, you’ve earned a rest. Have Mira show him about, get him equipped, give him some tips. And have her dig up some decent clothes. The boy looks like a storm-blown scarecrow.”

Cole almost explained his costume, but Adam seemed through talking to him. Durny ushered him away and began asking people if they had seen Mira.

Before long, Cole found himself facing a girl nearly his height. She wore boots, corduroy pants, a collared shirt, and suspenders printed with shamrocks. Her brown hair was chopped short. She wasn’t very clean, but that couldn’t hide her pretty gray eyes and cute face.

“Find some new monster bait?” she asked Durny.

“Go easy,” Durny said. “Boy’s had a rough week. Mira, this is Cole. He’ll be raiding tomorrow. He needs to learn the ropes.”

Mira gave Cole a once-over. “Let me guess. He needs clothes, too.”

“He’s all yours.”

Durny moved away.

“Not a lot of girls here,” Cole said.

“We have more than you see topside,” she said. “Most of the girls stay below.”

“In the basement?”

“In the caves. This whole section of the cliff is honeycombed with them. That’s why they built here. We’re right above them.”

“It’s a big building,” Cole said.

“Big enough for most everyone to have a room topside. But some prefer the caves. When a storm comes, everyone prefers the caves.”

“You get bad storms?”

“It doesn’t get much worse than a castle landing on you.”

“Has that happened?”

“They’ve had close calls. Some damage. No direct hits.”

Cole regarded Mira pensively. “Have you been here long?”

“A couple of years.”

“Really? You must have been young when you came here.”

She shrugged. “I’m about eleven.”

“‘About’?”

“I’m an orphan. Nobody knows when my birthday is.”

She didn’t seem to be asking for pity, so Cole tried not to give it. “Are you going to help me survive tomorrow?”

“Survival is up to you. I can help you get your stuff.”

A boy, maybe a year older than Cole, chummily clapped Mira on the back. “Did you finally find a boyfriend?” he asked.

Her shoulders hunched uncomfortably until he removed his hand. “No, but I already have a boy-enemy.”

“Nice,” he said, smiling. He stood a few inches taller than Cole, with a bronze complexion and dark hair. He held out his hand. “I’m Jace.”

Cole shook it. “Cole.”

“You’re my new best friend.”

“How come?”

“With Fiddler gone, it was my turn to scout tomorrow.”

“Glad I could help,” Cole said.

“If you get an easy one, we aren’t friends anymore. If you get killed, I’ll love you forever.”

“Buzz off,” Mira said. “I need to show him the place.”

“Listen to everything she says,” Jace advised. “Then do the opposite.”

Mira punched at him, but Jace dodged away.

“Come on,” Mira said.

Cole followed her out of the common room and down a wide hall. They turned corners, passed some doors, then went down a flight of stairs.

“Where are you from?” Mira asked.

“Earth,” Cole said.

“You’re from outside? How long have you been here?”

“About a week.”

For the first time he saw a flash of real sympathy in her face. She stopped walking. “A week?”

“My friends got kidnapped by slavers. I followed them through to try to help them.”

“You came through on your own?” She sounded impressed.

“I had no idea where I was going. I got caught. Then Durny bought me.”

She gave a little nod. “Do you know what the Sky Raiders do?”

“They raid the floating castles. That’s all I know.”



“This is a salvage operation,” Mira explained. “There’s nothing alive in those castles. Not truly. Just semblances. Some are big and dangerous, some seem like people, but none are really living. Most of the semblances disintegrate if you bring them back here, just like the floatstones if they head inland. Everything else holds together just fine. It’s all ownerless and headed for the Eastern Cloudwall, never to be seen again. So the Sky Raiders take what they can. We keep certain valuables, but most of it goes to the salvage yard. People come from all over the Outskirts to buy our finds.”

“Sometimes the semblances are dangerous?”

Mira huffed. “Up in the castles, they seem plenty real. Some castles are empty. Some are deadly. If nothing gets taken, it doesn’t count as a mission, so make sure something gets back to the ship every time, even if it’s just a floatstone.”

“Got it. I don’t want to end up doing more than fifty missions.”

“Right.”

Cole cleared his throat. “So I’m the bait. For the semblances.”

“More or less. Nobody wants to see you fail. They’ll scope out the castle before they send you down. They’ll be ready to lend a hand if possible. And we’ll equip you.”

She opened a door to a room full of clothes. “Your outfit is about function, not fashion. You want clothes that let you move freely, have enough pockets, and maybe give a little protection. Put tough material over your knees and elbows.”

The room contained a bizarre variety of clothing—tunics, long underwear, embroidered robes, a sequin cape, a medieval breastplate, turbans, a trench

coat, a pliable cloak as clear as glass, grass skirts, a football helmet, garlands, beaded vests, and togas. Cole fingered a fringed buckskin jacket, like the kind Davy Crockett might wear. “Where did all of this come from?”

“You get one guess.”

“The castles?” Cole picked up the football helmet by the face mask. “Do you even play football here?”

“Is that a game?”

He set it down. “Do the castles come from my world?”

“Do you have floating castles on Earth?”

“No,” Cole said. “But we have a lot of this stuff. Like that T-shirt over there. It’s for a movie called *Medal of Shame*. It doesn’t belong here.”

“Nothing *belongs* in the castles,” Mira said. “It’s why they’re worth raiding. You never know what you might find. It might be valuable or useful. It might be garbage. But it’s there for the taking.”

“If you don’t get killed.”

“You’re catching on.”

Cole picked up the breastplate. It was heavier than he had expected.

“First and last, worry about speed,” Mira advised. “If things go wrong, you’ll survive by escaping.”

Cole put down the piece of armor. He decided the football helmet would be cumbersome as well, limiting his vision. He grabbed a shirt and pants that looked about the right size. He tried on some different shoes until he found a match. At the end he added the buckskin jacket, even though it was a little too large.

“If anything doesn’t fit right, just come back and trade,” Mira said. “This other room is more important.” She led him to the next door in the hall. “You get to pick one special item crafted by our shapers. Durny leads them these days. Don’t try to take more than one. If you get caught sneaking more, you’ll be in big trouble. These items are hard to make and usually get lost when a scout . . . doesn’t survive. So they can’t afford more than one per scout. Same rule applies to most in a raiding party.”

Arranged on racks and shelves, weapons and gear filled the room. Cole saw swords, axes, spears, javelins, bows, arrows, crossbows, slings, maces, war hammers, knives, and throwing stars. He also noticed ropes, packs, shields, bottles, compasses, spyglasses, and all sorts of knickknacks ranging from figurines to shells.

“What should I pick?” Cole asked.

“You want something shaped,” she replied. “Many of the items here have special properties. Take some of the best ropes for example: a Winding Rope will tie itself around things, a Climbing Rope can stand up straight like a pole without any support, and a Slithering Rope will track and bind a target.”

“No way,” Cole said. “Seriously?”

“Get used to the unbelievable,” Mira replied. “You’ll find plenty of it in the castles.”

“I don’t know anything about this place,” Cole admitted. “You should probably choose for me.”

“I always bring a Jumping Sword,” Mira said.

“You’ve scouted?”

“The scouts aren’t the only ones who get to bring something,” Mira said. “I did scout a little when I first came here, but then I showed some potential as a shaper.”

“You’re a shaper?”

She gave an embarrassed smile. “Barely. Not a good one. But since I’ve learned a few little tricks, they don’t want to waste me as a scout.”

“Like how I’m going to get wasted,” Cole said.

“Don’t think that way,” Mira said. “You need to get cocky about it. The cocky ones last longer. Some even make it to fifty.”

“I’ll aim for a hundred.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“What does the Jumping Sword do?”

Mira retrieved a short sword and unsheathed it. “It’s a weapon, obviously.” She sheathed it and set it down. “When you point it at something and shout ‘away,’ it’ll pull you in that direction. Hard. You can jump really far with it, but you have to be careful, because there is no guarantee of a soft landing.”

“Jumping far is important?” Cole asked.

“Escape is important,” Mira corrected. “You can jump into a lifeboat from a distance in an emergency. The Jumping Sword is a specialty of Durny’s. He makes more of them than any other item. They’re the most popular choice.”

“Does it always let you jump the same distance?”

“No. It depends what you point it at. You don’t have to point it perfectly. The sword seems to get what you mean. But it has limits. Point it at the top of a tall tower, and you’ll only make it partway there and then fall to your death.”

“Sounds like just what I need.”

She gave him an annoyed look. “It isn’t very safe, but neither is exploring these castles. The Jumping Sword is powerful and useful.”

“Does Jace use it?”

She shook her head. “He has this golden rope. It can do everything the other ropes can, and more.”

“Should I consider one of those?”

“You can’t. There’s only one. Jace found it himself. You can keep anything you find if you claim it as your one special item.”

Cole thought about that. “What if I find a huge diamond?”

“You could keep it instead of the Jumping Sword or whatever. Personally, I’d rather survive than have a sparkly rock.”

“Good point,” Cole said. When he made his escape from Skyport, the Jumping Sword would come in handy. “I’ll take a Jumping Sword.”

“Smart choice.” She handed him the sheathed sword. “Are you tired?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll track down some food and then help you find a bunk. Would you mind taking Fiddler’s old one?”

The idea of sleeping in a dead kid’s bed wasn’t his favorite. But he supposed a lot of the beds around here probably belonged to someone who had died at one time or another. “I guess not.”

“It’ll be less musty than the alternatives. You’ll be in with Jace, Slider, and Twitch.”

She started leading him toward the stairs. He caught her arm. She looked back at him, irritated and a little curious.

“Before we head back, do you have any tips?”

She considered the question. “Things tend to go bad right after you set foot on castle grounds or just after you enter a building. Always have an escape plan. Fighting is a last resort. It’s usually the last thing you do before you die.”

“Should I practice with the sword?”

“You could. I wouldn’t. Every time you jump with it is dangerous, so it’s better to save it for emergencies. It’ll work how I said.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Her eyes softened. “Don’t thank me. This might feel like good treatment after a slave caravan, but no worries. Tomorrow will remind you where you rank.”

## CHAPTER

## 8

# SKY RAIDERS

**A** vast cavern in the side of the cliff served as a landing bay for three big skycraft. Constructed out of dark wood, they looked vaguely like old pirate ships, though broader and flatter, with a pair of modest masts and no sails. Each had three lifeboats—one on each side and one at the back.

Jace led Cole toward the skycraft called *Domingo*, where several men were gathering. Morning light streamed through the open side of the cavern. Out in the blue sky, Cole could see numerous castles hovering.

“Lots of castles,” Cole mentioned.

“We usually have a crowded day after a quiet one,” Jace said. “That’s good news. Two other companies compete with us—the Cloud Skimmers and the Airmen. On a busy day like today we probably won’t have much competition.”

At the gangplank to the *Domingo*, a middle-aged man with unruly brown hair greeted Cole. “You’re Cole, the new scout,” he said, extending a hand.

Cole shook it. “Yes.”

“I’m Captain Post. Jumping Sword. Savvy choice.” He handed Cole a cord with a little cylindrical container dangling from it.

“What’s this?” Cole asked, accepting it.

“A poison capsule,” the captain said. “Have they discussed falling?”

“No.”

He jerked a thumb at the sky. “We don’t know if you’d ever land. Could be you’d fall until you starved. As a courtesy, we provide the capsule.”

Cole examined the container more closely.

“Top unscrews from the bottom,” Jace explained. “It’s airtight. The poison reeks, which wrecks any chance to use it as a weapon. They trust slaves here more than most places, but not enough to arm us for an assassination.”

“Put it on,” the captain said. “We all wear one.”

Cole fought down a feeling of dread as he slipped the cord over his head. He hated the idea of carrying something meant to end his own life.

“This way,” the captain said, leading Cole to a battered bin beside the gangplank. He selected a medium-size backpack from among others. “If you fall, this parachute is your best friend. Give the cord a sharp tug, and we’ll try to get a craft under you. The skycraft can only descend so far, but if you pull the cord quickly, you’ll have a chance.”

“Good to know,” Cole said, shrugging into the backpack. Jace helped him adjust the straps over his buckskin jacket.

“Jace is here to coach you,” the captain said. “Listen to him. He’s a survivor.” The captain moved away, giving orders to a group of men.

“Some scouts skip the parachute,” Jace said. “They don’t want the extra weight slowing them down.”



“Do you use one?”

“Always. The risk of a fall is real.”

“How many missions have you done?” Cole asked.

“The next will be my thirtieth.”

“More than halfway there.”

Jace gave him a rough shove. “You trying to jinx me? Never talk about how many you have left. Only what you’ve done.”

“Sorry,” Cole said, feeling off-balance. “I didn’t know.”

“You’ve got all fifty left,” Jace said. “All fifty. Now we’re even. Apology accepted. Looks like they’re ready for you.”

About twenty men, including Captain Post, had lined up along the gangplank. The captain signaled for Cole to come aboard. As Cole walked up the gangway, every man in the line shook his hand and thanked him for his service. There were no grins or jeers. They were serious. It made Cole’s stomach knot. These men were paying their last respects.

Cole was the first aboard, with Jace right behind him. The other men followed, moving to their stations. Jace led Cole to a bench near the front of the skycraft. Cole noticed that it was bolted to the deck.

“Freaked out yet?” Jace asked.

“Kind of,” Cole said. “That felt like a funeral.”

“It’s all you’ll get,” Jace said. “If you don’t make it, they’ll either leave your body on the castle, and it’ll drift off into the cloudwall, or you get buried in the air—the bottomless grave. There’s never a body to bring back.”

“Fun to think about,” Cole said, straining to sound brave.

“You get used to it,” Jace said. “If you live long enough.”

“You should become a motivational speaker.”

Jace grinned.

The skycraft drifted up and forward, not like a plane taking off, but like a weak helium balloon in a soft breeze. “Smooth,” Cole said.

“Most of the time,” Jace agreed. “The helmsman is back there.”

Cole followed his finger to where a man stood on a raised platform behind a large wooden wheel. A pair of tall levers jutted up from the deck, one on each side of him.

As the *Domingo* coasted out into the glare of the rising sun, Cole shielded his eyes. The day was clear and cool, and they floated along serenely, like how it might feel to travel by blimp.

“Can we stand at the railing?” Cole asked.

“Sure.”

They rose. Cole felt a little unsteady walking with the deck shifting underfoot, but it could have been worse. Once his hands were on the railing, he felt plenty secure. Scanning from one side of the sky to the other, he counted at least thirty castles, some at higher altitudes than others, some larger, all slowly drifting west to east.

“What exactly do I do?” he wondered.

“They’ll take you down in a lifeboat,” Jace said. “You’ll climb down a ladder. Usually nothing much happens until you set foot on castle grounds. Sometimes that alerts the semblances and they come running. Other times nothing happens until you enter a building, or trigger a response some other way. Sometimes the castle is empty—easy pickings. Your job is to scout to see if anything is worth taking and to check for threats.”

“If I get attacked?”

“Run for it,” Jace said. “Get back to the lifeboat. They’ll try to help, but they won’t set it down. Once you’re safe, they’ll assess whether the threat is worth challenging. The guys in the lifeboat will bring weapons. The main ship has two ballistae—see over there?”

Cole saw what looked like a giant crossbow on the deck near the railing.

“They’ll mount that up and get it ready before you go down,” Jace said. “People will be covering you. We all want you to make it. And you have your Jumping Sword.”

“Did you bring your golden rope?” Cole asked.

“Did Mira tell you about that?” Jace produced a golden string, maybe a foot long. He noticed Cole’s perplexed stare. “It gets bigger.”

“She said it can do all sorts of things.”

“It can,” Jace said. “It was a lucky find. But a Jumping Sword has advantages too. I know some guys who did all fifty missions with a Jumping Sword, including some dicey ones.”

“How often does it get dicey?”

“Roughly? I guess one in three missions amounts to nothing. The rest are at least annoying. Maybe one in eight will give you nightmares. That’s not exact. It depends on your luck.”

“Define ‘annoying.’”

“Am I a dictionary? You know, you eventually have to run for it, but you know you’ll probably make it.”

“That’s just annoying?”

“Yeah, at least compared to the worst days.”

“What kind of stuff can happen?”

Jace ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve done this a lot, and you just have to be ready for anything. Once, a whole castle exploded, took out an entire skycraft. That was before my time. Nobody made it back. Some of the guys at Skyport saw it through their telescopes. The semblances might want to talk. Some are friendly or at least reasonable. Sometimes they’ll treat you like a guest. They might act nice, then try to backstab you. There can be monsters, traps, bees, poisonous gas, archers, fireballs—you name it. Anything.”

Cole didn’t feel very reassured to know there were millions of ways he might die. He hoped Jace didn’t notice how tightly he was squeezing the railing. Still gliding smoothly, the skycraft sped up enough that wind ruffled his hair.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Cole asked, looking out at the castles. The nearest one was horribly ruined. The next nearest was made mostly out of logs, giving it the appearance of an elaborate frontier fort.

“Not even the captain knows yet,” Jace said. “The spotters are checking our prospects. Badly ruined castles are almost always empty and have nothing worth taking. We wouldn’t go to one like that unless it was the only option. There have been too many bad experiences with castles that look really dark and scary, so we avoid those. Same with any metal ones. It isn’t an exact science. They’re looking for something promising—not too menacing, in decent shape, maybe with some hints of wealth.”

“What if one of the other salvagers wants the same castle?”

“You’ll plant a flag claiming it for the Sky Raiders first thing,” Jace said. “We’re all good about honoring claims. Saves a lot of violence.”

The skycraft went into a long bank, then straightened out. “Looks like we have a prospect,” Jace said, eyes forward. “See the one we’re heading for? They’ll take a closer look, then if they’re still feeling good about it, they’ll send out a lifeboat.”

On the way there, they passed a castle that looked to be made entirely from white styrofoam and duct tape. Another one that was not so near seemed like a natural formation of orange and yellow sandstone rather than something constructed. A few others in various states of disrepair looked more traditional. One floated along upside down.

Sooner than Cole liked, the skycraft turned in a wide circle around a solid gray castle, old but undamaged. The high wall had sturdy towers at intervals, and enclosed a big courtyard with a few smaller structures. The drawbridge was raised. The tallest towers belonged to the main building, which seemed to have been built more for intimidation than for beauty. In one corner of the courtyard, Cole observed a gallows and a guillotine. The sight made him shiver.

There was no sign of life on the walls or the towers, but down in the courtyard figures moved about. It was tough to see many details, but they walked purposefully, weaving among one another. Nobody sat or stood idle.

After the *Domingo* circled the castle twice, the captain, with two other men, approached Cole. “All we see are women on the move,” the captain said. “There’s an unnatural pattern to their activities. They could be drones, all but mindless. Or they could be dangerous. That’s for you to find out, Cole. The brothers, Jed and Eli, will pilot the lifeboat.”

The pair bore a strong resemblance to each other, though Eli was a little taller and broader through the shoulders. Eli had a longbow and Jed held a crossbow. They looked to be in their thirties.

“We’ll get you there and bring you back,” Eli said.

“Unless you don’t,” Jace added.

Jed smiled ruefully. “Unless we don’t. Come on.”

They led Cole to the rear of the skycraft, where they climbed into a lifeboat with the name *Okie Dokie* stenciled on the side. Jed squatted at the back, near the tiller and a pair of levers. Cole got situated beside Eli.

“Remember to shout if you use the sword,” Jace advised. “It might not respond if you say ‘away’ too softly. It’s a safety measure.”

“Got it,” Cole said, stomach fluttering, hands trembling.

“Die bravely,” Jace said.

“Die bravely,” the captain and several others echoed.

Cole glanced nervously at Eli.

“It’s unlucky to wish you good luck,” Eli explained. “We use ‘die bravely’ instead.”

“Thanks,” Cole said to the people on deck, with a little wave.

When the lifeboat lurched into the air, Cole caught hold of the side. It flew quite a bit faster than the *Domingo* and also rocked a lot more.

“The lifeboat is more of a ride,” Jed said with a laugh.

Cole watched as Jed worked the controls. The tiller swayed the boat from side to side. One lever tipped the nose up and down, the other adjusted their speed. Cole felt amusement-park tingles with every motion Jed made.

“We’ll drop you in the middle of the yard,” Eli said. “Just climb down the ladder. If you step on the ground and a monster bursts out of hiding, get right back on the ladder and we’ll soar away. Otherwise, we’ll hover above, helping to spot trouble, ready to swoop in if you need us. Understood?”

Cole watched the castle walls drawing near. His mouth was dry. “Yeah.”

“You never know,” Eli said. “There might be no trouble at all.”

“Castle is in good repair,” Jed said.

“Right,” said Eli.

“And it’s big. And we can see semblances.”

“We can always hope for the best.”

Jed shrugged.

As the lifeboat breezed over the outer wall, Eli leaned forward. “Busy, busy.”

Along the edges of the courtyard, doors opened and closed. Older women entered, exited, and crossed the yard, dressed in plain dresses and shawls.

The lifeboat slowed, hovering.

Dozens of women strode this way and that. None were young enough to be called middle-aged, but none were bent with extreme age, either. Some were empty-handed, some held buckets or brooms. None spoke or looked at one another, their expressions neutral.

“What do you think?” Jed asked.

“Let’s watch them,” Eli replied.

Although they were constantly coming and going, the number of women in the yard stayed at around three dozen. None of them gazed up at the lifeboat.

“What do you think, Cole?” Eli asked.

“Creepy.”

“I’ll grant you that,” Eli said. “Let’s see if this shakes them up.” He tossed a rope ladder over the side. It unrolled, the end dangling a couple of feet above the surface of the yard.

The women took no notice of it.

“They don’t act too alert,” Eli said. “It might mean there is no predator here. They would make easy prey.”

“They could be the predators,” Jed said. “You never know.”

“Only one way to find out,” Eli said, patting Cole on the shoulder. “You ready?”

No part of Cole felt ready. His heart was pounding and his skin felt clammy. Managing a nod, he put a leg over the side and started down the flimsy ladder.



## CHAPTER

## 9

# SCOUT

**T**he ladder swung and twisted as Cole descended one rung at a time. Holding the flag made the climb tricky. A few rungs from the bottom he paused to study the women. Though not identical, they resembled one another—grayish complexions, neutral expressions, creased faces, bony builds, medium height, hair in buns, faded dresses, dark shawls.

He could find no differences between them and real people, except for their uninterested attitudes. Nobody glanced his way. Nobody paused. Nobody smiled. Instead each woman walked briskly about her business.

Cole stepped down to the bottom rung. He had been warned more than once that trouble tended to happen when you first reached the castle. What if this was it? What if he didn't make it back? Nobody would ever know what happened to him—not his parents and not his friends. He wondered if Jenna and Dalton believed he would come for them. He wondered if they would forgive him if he never showed up. Wherever they were, he hoped they weren't on dangerous missions, being used as monster bait.

Taking a deep breath, Cole checked the position of his sword. Keeping one hand on the ladder, he stepped down onto the paving stones of the courtyard.

Every woman immediately stopped. With chilling synchronization, they turned and stared directly at him.

Chills washed across Cole's shoulders and down his back. Frozen with surreal horror, he stared back.

As the moment stretched out, he wanted to race back up the ladder. But some instinctive part of him worried that as soon as he moved, they would rush him. He didn't breathe.

One woman bustled toward him, her footfalls noisy in the silent yard. She peered nervously over her shoulder more than once. The others remained still, solemn eyes boring into Cole. The oncoming woman removed her shawl. When she reached him, she wrapped it around his shoulders and fastened it below his neck with a clasp.

As if responding to some invisible signal, the other women turned and continued about their business. One moment he had their full attention, the next he was utterly forgotten.

Remembering the flag in his hand, Cole set it on the ground. It stood upright despite lacking a base.

The woman without her shawl held out a hand to Cole. "This way," she urged. "We haven't much time."

"Why?" he asked.

"Not here," she said, anxious eyes checking the area. "Indoors." Her agitation was convincing. Supposedly, she wasn't alive, but there was nothing

phony about her appearance or demeanor. It was in the details—the redness at the corners of her eyes, the faint gloss of sweat on her forehead, the loose skin of her neck, the spots on the back of her hands, the ragged tips of her fingernails.

Cole took her hand and let her lead him away from the ladder. She placed her other arm around his shoulders protectively. Women marched past on either side, going about their errands without a flicker of interest in what was happening around them. But they had to be aware. He had stopped traffic when he first stepped off the ladder.

The woman kept her head down and walked swiftly. It didn't seem like she meant him any harm. If anything, he thought she was trying to help. But he stayed ready, in case she turned on him.

Cole noticed fossils embedded in the paving stones—mostly leaves, bugs, and fish. As they neared the castle, he saw similar fossils preserved in the wall.

The woman led him to a minor door into the main castle. They entered a corridor and passed another woman on her way out.

“What’s your name?” Cole asked quietly.

“Not yet,” she said, giving his hand a squeeze. They moved down the hall, then through a door into a storage room. Releasing him, she shut the door behind them. “Merva.”

“I’m Cole. What’s going on?”

“We have no time. It’s expecting me. We can’t break routine. It must be cleaned. You must come.”

“What’s expecting you? Come where?”

She took his hand again. “Keep near me. Move how I move. Say nothing.”

He resisted her pull. “Wait. You have to tell me what’s going on.”

Her grip tightened, and her face became agonized. “There’s not time. It’ll kill us all!”

Cole let her lead him from the room. She increased her pace to a fast trot. They passed a few other women in dresses and shawls.

This was happening too quickly. Cole had no idea where they were going or what they would face when they got there. He had lost all control of the situation. Merva’s desperation had vanished when they exited the storage room, but the glimpse of her terror had left him even more deeply unnerved. At least nothing had attacked them yet. Maybe Merva knew what she was doing.

He tried to keep an eye out for valuables. The halls were mostly bare. What furniture he saw looked simple.

They started down a dim, winding staircase. Women climbed up from below, passing them without a glance.

The stairs deposited them into a long, cavernous room, comparable to a subway station. A single creature filled the chamber—a nightmarish cross between a centipede and a scorpion. Armored by a glossy black shell, the monster was the size of a train. It had five sets of claws, each pincer larger than a minivan. Hundreds of legs supported the long, segmented body. The gargantuan tail curled up toward the ceiling, a vicious-looking stinger at the tip.

Anchored to rings in the floor, thick chains crisscrossed each segment of its body. Women bustled everywhere, cleaning the creature with rags, mops,

brooms, chisels, and sponges.

The sheer scale of the monster left Cole stunned. The busy women looked like insects by comparison. No wonder Merva had worried about making it angry.

Cole realized he was in way over his head. His best chance of survival was probably to follow Merva's instructions. She seemed to think there was a chance of keeping the monster calm. After a brief hesitation at his first sight of the colossal scorpipede, he stayed close to her, carefully matching her pace and posture. She no longer hurried. He tried to breathe quietly.

She led him to a wall where she retrieved a large iron crowbar. Cole reached for one as well, but she waved him off, pointing at hers. Apparently she wanted them to share.

Merva walked along the huge body of the scorpipede. Each segment was several paces long and more than three times taller than Cole. She stopped where the casing of one segment overlapped the next, and started chiseling at the gap between them. With her eyes, Merva told Cole to help. Placing his hands on the crowbar, he assisted as they chipped away material from the slick surface of the shell.

A ripple ran along the body of the scorpipede, making some of the chains squeal. The nearest pincers scissored opened and closed a few times, prompting some of the women to momentarily back away.

Merva wedged the crowbar deeper between the segments and scraped harder. Cole helped her push, lever, and pull.

The scorpipede shuddered. Cole felt the sharp vibrations through the crowbar. Then came a screeching roar that was high and low at the same

time. The penetrating noise thrummed in his bones and teeth.

The room went still. In unison, all the women besides Merva dropped their tools. Brushes, gaffs, crowbars, poles, mops, and brooms clattered to the floor. As one, the women turned to stare at Merva.

All color draining from her face, Merva brushed Cole's hands from the crowbar. "It knows," she murmured.

Merva glanced down at the shawl he wore and then around at the women. Cole suddenly realized that the attention was on her because she lacked her shawl. Her expression became blank, her voice monotone. "It knows I tried to conceal you. You might as well try to run."

As Cole took his first step away from the scorpipede, the creature reared up, mighty chains snapping like threads and whipping around violently. More than one woman went flying, but the others didn't scatter. They held still, watching Merva.

Glancing back, Cole saw the tail lash down, spearing Merva with the stinger. He skidded to a halt. The stinger withdrew and stabbed another woman with merciless precision. Merva stayed on her feet for a moment, eyes distant, then collapsed.

Cole felt horrified, but there was nothing he could do to help her. If he didn't get away soon, he would be next. As the segmented body bucked and squirmed, giant claws clamped other women. None cried out or tried to escape.

Focusing on the stairway, Cole yanked out his sword. The floor trembled with the thrashing of the scorpipede. The castle walls groaned. The whole

place might come down on him any second, if the stinger didn't pierce him first. Pointing his sword at the base of the stairs, Cole yelled, "Away!"

The sword pulled his body from the floor. Holding tightly, he sped forward at a low trajectory, never more than a few feet high. As his destination approached, Cole realized he would be crushed against the stone steps. But the sword decelerated enough at the last moment that instead of impacting with backbreaking force, he almost stayed on his feet, and tumbled into the steps jarringly instead of fatally.

The scorpipede screech-roared again. Driven by terror, Cole rose and dashed up the steps. He had hurt one hand trying to catch himself, and a shoulder and knee had taken harsh blows, but there was no time to really recognize the pain.

The stairway seemed longer going up than coming down. His thighs burned with exertion. The stairway rumbled and then quaked. Cole could hear stones falling.

He considered using his sword to climb faster, but since the stairway spiraled, he could never point it very far ahead, and little leaps didn't seem worth the risk of falling. Beyond the top of the stairs, Cole tried to retrace the route to the courtyard. The dim corridors all looked alike, and soon he knew he had lost his way. He stayed at a full sprint, hoping that he wasn't going in circles. The castle continued to shake in response to an ominous rumble in the foundation.

Finally Cole saw a promising door at the end of a hall up ahead. It was not where he had entered, but it opened onto the courtyard. The lifeboat was in the air at the far side, ladder still dangling.

“I need out!” Cole screamed, rushing forward. The lifeboat banked and came his way.

Cole considered using the sword, but he would have to leap across almost the whole courtyard. He wasn't sure if it would pull him that far and wasn't sure he could catch hold of the ladder if it did. Instead he held the Jumping Sword ready and ran hard.

As the lifeboat came closer, the enormous scorpipede erupted from the ground between them, its shiny black body stretching skyward like a fairy-tale beanstalk, multiple sets of pincers grasping toward the little skycraft. Huge blocks of stone fountained like confetti and crashed down in all directions. Cole dodged a large one before the quaking ground dropped him to his knees.

For a moment the bulk of the creature completely obscured the lifeboat. Gritty dust hung in the air. A screeching roar saturated Cole's eardrums. By the time Cole saw the lifeboat again, it was curving up and away from the castle, passing beyond the wall, well out of jumping range.

He had missed his ride.

A lonely sense of doom smothered him.

His fate was sealed.

The towering scorpipede swiveled, then started to curl back on itself in Cole's direction. Relatively small mouthparts clicked open and closed, eager little mandibles. The body continued to emerge from the hole it had created. Last would come the tail and the evil stinger.

From high above, an arrow the size of a javelin lanced down. It hit the glossy carapace and rebounded harmlessly. The attack did no damage, but the



scorpipede reared back in that direction to investigate.

The oversized arrow must have come from the ballista aboard the *Domingo*. They were still trying to help him!

Cole scrambled to his feet. Maybe the lifeboat would come back around. He had to buy himself time. Nobody would be able to save him if he let fifty tons of ugly mash him into paste.

His only hope was the Jumping Sword. He scanned the courtyard, then noticed the balconies jutting from a pair of the castle's tallest towers.

With another ear-rending screech, the scorpipede swung back his way. Cole pointed his sword toward some bushes at the base of one of the towers and shouted, "Away!"

He was attempting to jump farther than his previous leap. As the sword pulled him forward, the acceleration took his breath away. He skimmed over the ground at a speed that should have led to death by road rash, but again the sword slowed somewhat at the end. His feet hit the ground an instant before his momentum heaved him into a bush.

After coming to rest, Cole realized that he was uninjured. Twigs snapped and leaves rustled as he extracted himself from the foliage. He got to his feet in time to see the tail of the scorpipede slither out of the hole and then curve up into the air, poised to sting. The monster scuttled his way.

Cole aimed his sword at a balcony high above him. If he failed to reach it, the fall would surely kill him. "Away!"

He had only jumped low before. This time he felt like a superhero taking flight. Air rushed by as he rocketed upward. He realized that somehow the sword exerted a pull on his whole body. If he had to trust only the strength of

his grip to keep hold of an object accelerating so rapidly, he never would have managed to do it.

Cole reached the balcony at the peak of his jump, allowing him to land lightly. After his ground-skimming leaps, the soft landing was a welcome relief.

The stinger-tipped tail rose up higher than the balcony, then blurred forward, punching a hole in the wall a few feet away. Shattered bits of stone peppered him as Cole fell flat. The stinger retracted and exploded up through the bottom of the balcony, missing him by inches. The balcony rocked and made horrible cracking sounds. The scorpipede might be striking blindly, but it wouldn't have to wait long for results.

Rising, Cole pointed his sword toward the neighboring tower and as he sprang, he yelled, "Away!" Roller-coaster sensations surged through him as he soared across the intervening space and up to another balcony, again landing gently at the apex of his flight.

The scorpipede let out another screech-roar, the tail flailing down below. He had traveled higher than it could reach. Cole looked hopefully for the lifeboat, but saw nothing. The scorpipede started climbing straight up the tower wall.

Pointing his sword at a higher balcony across the way, Cole said his word and jumped again. Once again he landed smoothly. A glance down showed the scorpipede climbing fast.

There was no time to really strategize, but a rough plan flashed through his mind. When he got to the top, hopefully the lifeboat would be within

range. He would either make a final jump to his rescuers or get trapped by the scorpipede with no escape.

If he leaped to the other tower with this next jump, he would be back on the same tower the scorpipede was climbing. But it was also the tower closest to the edge of the castle, which would allow Jed to steer the lifeboat within range at minimal risk.

Extending his sword, Cole jumped up to the flat roof of the opposite tower, landing in a crouch. Battlements surrounded the top like blunt teeth. Cole looked frantically in all directions. The *Domingo* hovered high above. Other castles floated in the distance.

When he saw the lifeboat, his heart sank.

It was swinging around to come his way, but it was too far out and much too low. They must not have spotted him climbing until a moment ago. Cole decided he could buy a little time by jumping back across to the roof of the neighboring tower before the scorpipede arrived. As he raised his sword, the tail shot up in his way.

Cole hesitated. With the scorpipede crawling up the tower, he would be in full view when he jumped. The tail would skewer him. The head of the scorpipede loomed into view, its weight crushing battlements as it leaned toward him. The tower shuddered as the scorpipede heaved more of itself to the top. The lifeboat would not be within jumping range in time.

But if he waited, he was dead.

Running away from the scorpipede, Cole jabbed his sword diagonally up and away from the tower, shouted “away,” and leaped with everything he had.

He launched into his biggest jump yet, testing the sword's limits. He heard the tail strike the castle behind him, and the scorpipede gave a furious cry.

Still curving upward, Cole saw the castle wall pass underneath him. His trajectory carried him well beyond the edge of the cloud at the castle's base. As he lost his forward momentum and plunged downward, all he saw beneath him was endless sky, dropping away to immeasurable purple depths.

The shawl flapped above him, held in place only by the clasp at his neck. Fumbling desperately, it took Cole a panicky moment to find his rip cord. He was falling almost straight down by the time he gave it a sharp tug. The parachute blossomed up above him, jerking him as it interrupted his descent.

As he slowed, the shawl draped down over his head. He pulled it off and tucked it under one arm. His heart was still racing. Down between his feet yawned such endless nothing that it gave him shivers.

Above and behind him, the scorpipede let out another screech-roar. It was loud even at this distance.

"We've got you!" called a voice from below and off to one side.

The lifeboat appeared beneath him, falling with him to catch him softly. Eli steadied his landing, sat him down, and began pulling in the parachute as it went limp. He bundled it expertly.

Cole sat in shocked silence as the *Okie Dokie* climbed. He had hoped they would get to him before he dropped below where the skycraft could descend. And they had. He had made it.

He couldn't believe he was alive. He had been so close to dying that at some level he had known he was only prolonging the inevitable. But now he was safe.

Eli and Jed stayed silent, and so did he. They rose toward the *Domingo*, glided up above it, then landed on the deck at the rear.

“Quite a performance,” Captain Post greeted as Cole clambered out of the lifeboat.

Cole tried to muster a smile. “I thought I was dead.”

Jace came up and gave him a big hug. “You’re officially my best friend.”

“That was a bad one?” Cole asked hopefully.

“Terrible,” Jace conceded. “You shouldn’t have survived.”

“One down,” Cole said shakily.

“Weeeell,” Jace replied, stretching the word out. “You have to bring something back for it to count.”

Cole paused and then gave a single chuckle. “I forgot to even think about that.”

“What have you there?” the captain asked.

“It has to be something valuable,” Jace explained hesitantly. “Something we would salvage on purpose.”

The captain took the shawl from Cole, shook it out, and held it up. “It’s less than we would normally accept. But that was a brutal first outing.” He eyed the shawl more closely. “It’s in good condition. And it might have useful properties—the other semblances ignored you once you put it on. If nothing else, I know a woman who might thank us for this. Granted, it’s a bit more effort than one would normally make to acquire a wrap, but we’ll count the mission valid.”

Cole slumped with relief.

“Nice job, rookie,” Jace said with a jeering smile. “Only forty-nine to go!”

## CHAPTER

# 10

# STARRY NIGHT

**A** falling star blazed diagonally across the sky, a searing ember of white-gold brilliance with a long tail. After flaring bright enough to cast shadows and make Cole squint, the meteor shrank to a spark, vanishing before it reached the horizon.

Cole's eyes needed a moment to adjust so he could get back to enjoying the sky. Several of the stars were brighter than any he had seen in Arizona. There was more variety in color as well, particularly in shades of red and blue. He could make out the little spiral smudges of distant galaxies, and cloudy patches of light that were either nebulae or dense clusters of faraway stars.

Stranger than anything was the rising moon. It wasn't like the moon back home. It was smaller, dimmer, bluer, and more translucent, almost like a glowing ball of ice. He wondered why he hadn't noticed the difference before.

"You shouldn't be out after dark without a good reason," a voice said from behind.

Cole glanced back to find Mira coming toward him across the back porch. "I'm not far from the door. There's a wall around the whole area."

"Even the yard can be dangerous once the sun goes down."

"I needed some time alone."

"There are places in the caves," she said.

"Not with stars," he replied.

Mira stood next to where he sat on the porch steps. "True." She stared out at the dark salvage yard.

Cole had wanted some alone time, but he found himself glad for the company. He hadn't spoken to Mira since she'd equipped him the night before. "I just saw a shooting star," Cole said. "A bright one."

"We have a beautiful sky," Mira said wistfully.

"It's different from the one on Earth."

"People from outside always comment on it. At least the observant ones do."

"The moon is really different."

She gave a faint smile. "That isn't our most common moon. It's Naori, the Shiver Moon. We only see it now and then."

"That makes sense," Cole said. "I think one of your more regular moons is more like ours."

"Light can partially pass through Naori, so it's always full," she said. "They make a big deal about it in Necronum."

"How many different moons do you have here?"

"At least twenty," Mira said.

"Are they ever all up at once?"

“I’ve never seen more than five at the same time. Sometimes there are none.”

Cole reconsidered the glittering sky. “You guys must have complicated calendars.”

“There are no really reliable calendars,” she said. “There isn’t much of a pattern to the moons or the stars. You can never be sure what sky you’ll get. The years tend to be around three hundred and fifty days, but the seasons are haphazard. It can be summer for a hundred days, autumn for twelve, winter for forty, spring for two hundred, then summer for twenty, and on and on without any kind of pattern. The days aren’t trustworthy either. We measure hours, but only to track how many have passed since sunrise. First hour, second hour, and so on. Then we start counting again from sunset. Most days are around twelve hours, followed by twelve hours of night. Without warning, they can be as short as four, or as long as thirty, though the extremes aren’t common.”

“Wow,” Cole said. “Do you have more than one sun?”

“Almost always just one. It usually rises in the east and sets in the west. Sometimes we have dusksdays, when the sun seems to be rising in all directions but never does.”

“I saw one of those.”

“That’s right. We had one not too long ago.”

Cole scanned the salvage yard, cluttered with bizarre, shadowy shapes, great and small. Among the discernible objects were statues, potted trees, cages, wicker baskets, outdoor furniture, coiled chains, a huge barbershop pole, a battered jukebox, a canoe, an old-fashioned bicycle with a huge front



wheel, and a shantytown of sheds, large and small, that probably housed more fragile treasures. The yard was still, the night cool. The door into Skyport was only a few steps away. It was hard to believe he was in any danger.

“You shouldn’t lurk out here,” Mira said. “They’re still talking about your escape from the centipede. You ought to soak it up.”

“Scorpipede,” Cole corrected. “At least, that was how I thought of it. Part scorpion. It had claws.”

“Whatever,” Mira said. “You should come enjoy the attention. These men have seen it all. They’re not easy to impress, especially on a first outing.”

“I should be dead,” Cole said, suddenly fighting a hard lump in his throat. “This lady . . . she protected me. The scorpipede . . .” He couldn’t continue speaking and keep it together, so he stopped.

“One of the semblances?” Mira asked.

Cole nodded, not trusting his voice.

Mira crouched beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re sweet, but you can’t let that get to you. She wasn’t real. None of them were. They’re just puppets. Dangerous, lifelike, but puppets.”

“She gave me her shawl to help hide me. She seemed so real, Mira. Perfectly real.”

“Some do. It’s an illusion. They’re just temporary. If you had brought her back here, she would have dissolved into dust. Only some of the simplest ones have any chance of surviving outside the castles. That lady didn’t die. She wasn’t alive. She was heading for nothingness in a day or two, when the castle vanishes into the cloudwall.”

Cole stared down at his hands. The guilt had gnawed at him all day, but Mira's explanation helped. "One mission down."

"At least the other one was more fruitful."

Cole smiled at her wordplay. One of his bunkmates, a boy called Twitch, had scouted today for another Sky Raider ship, the *Borrower*. They had found what looked like a village of big, fancy gazebos. The woodwork was all fragile and ornate, but the raiders were most interested in the extensive gardens, especially the fruit trees. At a signal from the *Borrower*, the *Domingo* had joined in reaping the harvest.

The only obstacles had been a few giant carnivorous weeds. Since the weeds were stationary, they were easily avoided once you knew to watch for them. Both ships had spent the day off-loading fruit of all description. Some were familiar, including oranges, lemons, bananas, plums, apricots, apples, pears, and kiwis. Other varieties had looked foreign—fruit protected by stinging tendrils, fruit that grew in clusters like grapes but had thick rinds, fruit they had to chisel out of the trunks like tumors.

"We brought a lot of food," Cole said.

"We never go hungry here. Some food comes from the castles. Plus, traders go out of their way to bring us goods. They know we can pay or barter."

Cole looked around. "It doesn't seem dangerous out here."

Mira shrugged. "It's safer inside the walls of the salvage yard than out in the open. But just because you don't get killed tonight doesn't mean you won't get ambushed tomorrow. Bad things come up from lower down the cliffs at night. We seal the caves carefully. We have some tricks that help

keep the night stalkers away from Skyport. But it can get plenty dangerous. A lot of people have disappeared because they braved the Brink at night.”

Her words made Cole less comfortable. Certain pockets of shadow suddenly seemed more suspicious. Had one of the sculptures shifted position a little?

“Maybe we should go in,” Cole suggested, standing.

“You go ahead,” Mira said, stepping out into the yard, head craned back to take in the sky. “I just need a minute to unwind after—”

She froze and said nothing more.

“After what? Mira?”

She looked at him, and for an instant he saw unbridled panic in her eyes.

“Are you all right?” Cole asked, looking up for signs of danger. All he saw were stars. What was he missing?

“I’m fine,” Mira insisted with an uncomfortable smile. “I just . . . I remembered something I forgot to do. Something important. I’ll come in with you.”

“Are you sure?” Cole asked. “For a second there, you looked like you’d seen a ghost.”

She gave a feeble smile. “Life of a slave. I forgot to do a chore that could get me in trouble.”

“Need help?”

He followed her through a doorway into a hall. She closed the sturdy door and locked it in three places. “I should do it on my own. Thanks, though. You’ve had a busy day. Go get some rest.”

Cole watched her walk away. He had a strong suspicion that she wasn't being completely honest with him. While looking up, she had seen something that scared her, and then tried to mask her reaction. Could it have been a winged creature? Did the night stalkers fly? Maybe she'd glimpsed a threat lurking on the roof?

He looked back at the door. He could peek out to see if something had entered the yard. No, if some monster had scared her that badly, he didn't want to take the risk.

But why would she try to cover up something like that? If she had seen a monster coming for them, why not grab him and race indoors? Why be secretive? Why make up an excuse?

Maybe her excuse was real. He supposed an important task left undone could explain her reaction. Looking at the sky might have reminded her. Or it might have been a coincidence.

Avoiding the boisterous commotion of the common area, Cole made his way to his room. He had already eaten, and decided he would take Mira's advice and get some rest.

The narrow bunk room had a high ceiling and a pair of stacked bunks on either side. Cole found Twitch seated on a bottom bunk. His head jerked up, as if Cole had startled him, blue eyes wide and round. The short, skinny boy had a young face. He couldn't be older than ten.

"I didn't know you were in here," Cole said. He hadn't spoken much with him besides a quick introduction the night before.

Twitch licked his lips. "All the people can be . . . a little much. Do you need the room?"

“Not for anything special. I was just getting tired.” Cole had been assigned the bunk above Twitch, across from Slider.

“Don’t let me stop you. I can dim the lamp.” Twitch hopped out of bed and crossed to the oil lantern.

“Nice job finding all that fruit.”

Twitch gave a weak chuckle. “Don’t thank me for the fruit. Spotters handled that. Thank me for almost getting eaten by a plant. I barely got out of the way in time.” The lantern dimmed.

“Those things were scary.”

“They weren’t too bad once you knew what they looked like and could keep out of range.”

“But you had to find out the hard way.” Cole opened the trunk he had inherited and started changing into his sleeping clothes.

Twitch went back to sit on his bed. “A crazy part of me almost wishes the weeds got me.”

“What?”

“Just to end the suspense. It’s too much. If something is going to get me sooner or later, sooner might be a mercy.”

“Don’t think like that,” Cole said. “You have to aim for fifty.”

“I’ve done sixteen missions. I don’t want to even think about fifty. That isn’t the end, you know. After fifty, the danger isn’t gone. The scouts aren’t the only raiders who have accidents. The other jobs are only a little safer.”

“Well, you’ve done fifteen more than me.” Cole stashed his clothes into his trunk. “Is Twitch your real name?”

“Ruben.”

“Why do they call you Twitch?”

“Very funny.”

“No, I’m serious.”

He studied Cole as if measuring his sincerity. “I’m kind of jumpy. I guess I flinch a lot. That kind of thing. Some of them think I scout too slowly. If they don’t like it, they’re welcome to take my place.”

“Nothing wrong with being careful.”

“That’s what I say! It’s *my* neck I’m risking. I do it how I do it. Helped save me from those killer plants.”

“What item do you use? Jumping Sword?”

Twitch gave him a suspicious look. “Drop the act. Who put you up to this? Slider?”

“What do you mean?”

Twitch considered him. “Nobody knows what item I picked. I’ve never used it. Some of the other scouts are always trying to find out.”

“Why the mystery?”

“It’s not their business. I have little enough privacy. They know my birthmarks and the color of my underwear. My item is mine.” He shared a sneaky smile. “Not knowing drives Slider nuts.”

The door opened and Jace peeked in. “There you are! Man of the hour.” He came inside. “Already going to bed?”

“Long day,” Cole said.

“Busy night, too,” Jace replied.

“What do you mean?”

He wore a teasing grin. "I noticed you hanging out with Mira in the yard. Starry night, Shiver Moon . . . pretty romantic."

"Stop it," Cole said. "I just wanted some fresh air. She came out to warn me it could be dangerous."

"She came back in a hurry," Jace said. "Seemed kind of flustered. Maybe somebody was putting on the moves?"

"What? No way! She just forgot something she had to do."

Jace nodded knowingly. "Right. You're good."

It frustrated Cole that Jace kept after him. Why did he care so much? "Wait a minute," Cole said. "How do you know everything she was up to? Were you following her?"

"I just pay attention," he said, sounding a little defensive.

"We weren't by the common room." Understanding dawned. "Oh, I get it, *you* like her."

Twitch looked intently at Cole and gave a little shake of his head.

Jace exhaled sharply. "Whatever. In her dreams."

He was trying to act tough, but he couldn't hide that Cole had gotten to him. Twitch's anxiousness confirmed it. "How else could you know we were out there together?" Cole pressed. "You really were following her! Were you up on the roof?"

The guilt was written all over his face. "Shut up, Cole."

Cole made his voice dreamy. "I bet you wish *you* were with her under the stars. Sailing in a lifeboat, putting flowers in her hair."

"Keep your messed-up daydreams to yourself," Jace almost shouted, his eyes darting to Twitch.

“I wasn’t the one tailing her,” Cole pointed out.

Jace’s face went rigid. It took him a moment to speak. When he did, his voice was barely under control. “She’s one of the few people in this place who is actually nice. Actually a *good* person. I watch out for her a little. Don’t try to make it sound like I . . . You don’t want me to hate you, Cole. You really don’t. Watch it.”

Cole knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t resist. “I’m sure you’ll do plenty of watching for both of us.”

Jace’s hand strayed to his pocket. He glanced at Twitch again, who had his head down as if wishing he could disappear.

“I’m just messing with you,” Cole said, trying to lighten the mood.

“You’re right about that,” Jace replied. “I hope you think it’s worth it.”

Cole felt bad for teasing him so hard. Jace was really fuming. “Thanks for the tips today.”

“Want a new tip? Stay out of my way.”

“We sleep in the same room.”

“Then borrow a lesson from Twitch and keep your head down.” He turned and walked out, leaving the door open.

After a quiet moment, Twitch went and closed it.

“What was that about?” Cole asked.

“You’re not very careful,” Twitch replied.

“Neither was he.”

“He’s not new. I’d watch my step. Jace is probably the best scout we have. He’s the last kid I’d want to cross.”

“Does he have a crush on Mira?”



“We should forget about it. But what do you think?”

It seemed pretty obvious, especially since he had been so touchy about the subject. Cole considered how he would feel if somebody had caught on that he liked Jenna and kept pestering him about it. “I’ll try to make it up to him.”

“That’ll just remind him. The smart move would be to follow instructions. Keep your head down and let it blow over.”

## CHAPTER

# 11

## PROVING GROUND

**O**ne week later, Cole boarded the *Domingo* for his fifth scouting mission. As a rule, the captains tried not to assign any scout more than three missions in a week, but that courtesy was getting harder to honor since two scouts had died over the last five days. Cole hadn't really known either of the boys.

He couldn't help wondering whether other slaves from the caravan of trick-or-treaters would end up at Skyport. According to Twitch, Adam Jones seldom sent buyers to Five Roads to make purchases. Certain slave brokers made acquisitions there and brought likely candidates directly to Skyport. Part of him didn't want any members of the caravan to end up at Skyport, but a more secret part hoped for it, just so he could see someone from his world and feel a little less alone.

Dalton and Jenna had been selected to go to the king, so even if people from his caravan ended up here, they wouldn't be the ones he was most anxious to see. He tried to be happy for them. Hopefully, serving the king would be safer than raiding sky castles.

None of the three missions since the scorpipede had been as harrowing as his first outing. The worst had involved headless semblances chasing him through mazelike ruins around a single tall tower. The entire area had been slanted about ten degrees from level. Not exactly a day at the beach, but the Jumping Sword had kept him out of their clutches.

He had made little progress on an escape plan. His superiors kept him busy. If he wasn't trying to stay alive as a scout, then he was doing chores. Skyport was isolated, and a runaway could be tracked down by a mounted militia armed with special items. But Cole had noticed that as people earned more trust here, they were occasionally included in groups that traveled away from the Brink on Skyport business. That gave him something to daydream about while he searched for other opportunities to escape.

As he advanced up the gangway one handshake at a time, Cole found Mira and Durny in line to thank him. She wore a Jumping Sword at her waist. Cole wanted to ask why she had come aboard, but stopped himself. He had taken Twitch's advice about not antagonizing Jace, and a part of that had included avoiding Mira. She had made no effort to seek him out, either. Jace still wasn't acting very friendly, but at least he had stopped giving Cole angry looks.

Because Cole had been avoiding Mira, shaking her hand made him uncomfortable. He accepted her thanks with a nod. It was peculiar to have Durny along as well, since he spent most of his time in his workshop, shaping objects and training apprentices.

Handshakes finished, Cole went and sat on his usual bench while the other men took up their stations. Mira and Durny joined him.

“Where have you been hiding out?” Mira asked.

Trying to act casual, Cole shrugged. “I wondered the same thing. I haven’t seen you around.”

“I’ve practiced a lot with Durny this week.”

“What brings you guys onboard?” Cole asked.

“We mean to harvest floatstones,” Durny said.

“Durny wants to teach me how to extract them,” Mira clarified.

“Dangerous work,” Durny said. “Remove the wrong floatstone and an entire castle might collapse.”

“Why risk it?” Cole asked. The Sky Raiders had three major skycraft—two for active missions, and a third held in reserve.

“No immediate purpose,” Durny said. “Educational reasons, mostly.”

“The raiders don’t have any floatstones stockpiled,” Mira said. “So they always come in handy.”

“Valid point,” Durny agreed. “No matter how carefully the captains fly, skycraft eventually get lost or damaged.”

Cole scrunched his eyebrows. “If they need floatstones to make the skycraft, and they use skycraft to get the floatstones, where did the first floatstones come from?”

Durny tapped his temple. “A thinker, this one. It isn’t documented. Presumably, some bold shapers made it out to the castles using balloons or gliders.”

Cole nodded.

As the *Domingo* drifted out of the landing bay, Cole went to the railing so he could watch the sky. Near and far, high and low, white, billowy clouds

obstructed his line of sight. Their shapes and textures were so clearly defined that they looked almost solid. He counted five castles, but the plentiful clouds most likely concealed many others.

Mira joined him at the railing. “Much cloudier and they might not have flown today.”

“Does it sometimes get foggy?”

“It can. Or stormy. Either way, the skycraft stay grounded.”

“I’m surprised there isn’t a castle on each one.”

“The castles don’t sit on clouds,” Mira said. “The floatstones hold them up. Clouds just form around the foundations. I don’t know why.”

They stood together in silence as the *Domingo* weaved among the slowly shifting clouds. Castles regularly came in and out of view.

“Did Jace give you a hard time?” Mira asked.

Cole looked at her sharply. “What?”

“He got the idea in his head that you’d upset me,” she said. “He kept bugging me about it. I told him he was wrong, but it can be hard to get through to him. He tries to be protective.”

Cole wondered if he should mention that Jace had a huge crush on her. If Jace ever found out, he would go nuclear. It wasn’t worth more trouble. Mira probably already knew. “He’s fine. It’s no big deal.”

Mira nodded. She glanced at the clouds. “You nervous?”

“About the castle? Of course.”

“As bad as the first time?”

“Different. At least I know the drill. Then again, I also have a better idea of how bad it can get.”

The *Domingo* started circling a complex of buildings connected by wide patios. The stately structures were made of white stone and featured lots of grooved pillars. Water splashed in numerous marble fountains. The only greenery came from a few narrow lawns and some neatly squared hedges. Fires burned in large kettles, in suspended bowls, and on platters held by statues. Cole could smell the smoke.

“Die bravely,” Mira said as the captain approached.

“I like this prospect,” Captain Post said. “So do the spotters. Go have a closer look.”

“Should I take the shawl?” Cole asked.

Captain Post had kept Merva’s shawl. He had sent out some scouts wearing it to see if it helped conceal them from semblances. If it had turned out to be powerful, he’d meant to make it a special item. That didn’t seem to be the case. “It didn’t stop those headless fiends from chasing you. I haven’t seen it do anything.”

“It might have only worked at the castle where you found it,” Mira chimed in. “Some items are like that.”

“I’ve used it every time,” Cole said. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Take it, then,” the captain said. “Nothing wrong with a lucky token or two.” He went and retrieved it from a nearby bin. “Keep it if you’d like.”

“Thanks.”

Cole fastened the clasp around his neck and then climbed into the *Okie Dokie* with Jed and Eli. They had ferried him on every scouting mission so far. They nodded in greeting. No words were exchanged as Jed guided the lifeboat into the sky.

“Any preference to where we put you down?” Jed asked.

While Cole studied the collection of buildings and patios, a man emerged from between the columns of one of the largest buildings and started down broad steps toward a fountain. Dressed like a Roman soldier, he wore a breastplate molded to his powerful torso and carried a hefty sword in one hand. Shielding his eyes, he looked up at the lifeboat.

“Think he’s trouble?” Cole asked.

“That knife looks a little big for dicing vegetables,” Eli observed.

“He sees us,” Cole said. “Might as well put me down near him.”

“You got it,” Jed replied.

The soldier waited as the boat came to a halt above him. Eli threw out the rope ladder. Cole climbed down, flag in hand. The man watched him silently. He made no threatening gesture. Still, when Cole reached the bottom, he felt hesitant to step off. The soldier only stood a few paces away.

“Mind if I join you?” Cole asked.

“Up to you,” the man said. His wild hair hung almost to his shoulders. A jewel gleamed in one earlobe. Complex bindings held his sandals in place and were partly hidden beneath his metal shin guards.

Cole planted the flag by dropping it to the ground, then drew his sword. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“I wouldn’t want to fight me either.”

Cole stepped down. The man watched him curiously. Cole stayed ready to jump.

“Explain the flag,” the man said.

“It’s just a signal,” Cole replied. “Proof I came here.”

“State your business,” the soldier said. His voice was manly and resonant, but not unfriendly.

“I’m a scout,” Cole said.

“A scout has no business here,” he said. “This is a place for heroes.”

“Are you a hero?”

“I am Lyrus. The vital question is, are you a hero?”

“What if I’m not?”

“Then you had better hurry back up that ladder.”

“I have a sword,” Cole said, holding it up.

Lyrus rolled his eyes. “Is that little thing your best argument?”

“I fought a scorpipede.”

“That’s more promising. What’s a scorpipede? Was it big?”

“Huge. Longer than most of these buildings.”

Lyrus brightened. “Did you slay it?”

“Um, no, but it didn’t kill me, either.”

“Did you wound it?”

“Not really. I mostly ran from it.”

Lyrus looked disappointed.

“But I got away,” Cole added. “It was a good chase.”

“Were you rescuing somebody?”

“No.”

“Hunting treasure?”

“Sort of.”

“What did you claim?”

“Just this shawl,” Cole said, tugging on it.



“Hmmm,” Lyrus said. “Why the shawl? Can it turn you into a bat? Make you invisible?”

“No,” Cole said. “I don’t think it does much.”

Lyrus frowned thoughtfully. “Yet here you are.”

“Why is this place for heroes?” Cole asked.

Lyrus looked upon his surroundings with pride. “Parona is a sacred proving ground.”

“Heroes train here?”

Lyrus gave him half a grin. “Lessons are for elsewhere. This is no school. Champions come here to test themselves.”

Cole considered the area more cautiously. “How are they tested?”

“It depends how they choose.”

“Can they die?”

“Wouldn’t be much of a trial if they couldn’t. Are you staying or going?”

“I can still go?”

“I suppose. I’m the wrong person to ask. I don’t understand how cowards think.”

“Ouch! Are you daring me?”

“I’m stating a fact. I’ve never run from a fight or backed down from a challenge. Nor will I ever. But that is me. I see no valor in forcing a coward to prove himself when he would rather flee. Do you?”

“No.”

Lyrus gave a nod. “The man unwilling to brave the test has already shown himself to be much more craven than the man who fails.”

Cole couldn't help feeling offended. "What if I didn't come here to be tested? Heroes only need to be brave when there's a good reason. It would be stupid to risk your life without a purpose."

Lyrus sighed. "Every coward has his excuses."

"What are the tests?"

"The only way to find out is to try one."

"What do I get if I pass?"

"Confirmation of your heroic status."

"Like what? A certificate?"

"You get to keep a weapon from the arms room, a work of art from the gallery, and an item from the treasure house."

Cole glanced up at the lifeboat. "Can I tell you why I'm here and get your advice?"

"If you wish."

"We're salvagers. We want to take some stuff before this place is destroyed. Would each person have to pass a test to take something?"

Lyrus paused. "There are five trials prepared."

"What if we pass all five?"

"Then . . . I would arrange for more."

"Would you have time?"

Lyrus scowled in thought.

"This place will only be around for a day or two," Cole pointed out.

"Nonsense."

"You know we're floating in the sky."

"Nonsense."

Cole glanced upward. "I came here in a flying ship. Look around."

"Non—" Lyrus began, but then stopped himself. He squinted up at the *Okie Dokie*. He surveyed the area. "I feel . . . odd." He rubbed his eyes. "It's hard to explain." He scanned the area some more. "How have I missed so much?" He folded his arms. "It's as though I'm not supposed to recognize what I'm seeing. I'm not supposed to pay attention." He gave a sheepish smile. "I never thought about whether Parona was in the sky or not. I didn't stop to consider the odd manner of your arrival. Yet I see it all now, and no matter what impulses compel me otherwise, I cannot unsee it. I never run. I never hide. Not from anything."

Cole felt bad for the big soldier. He knew he had just messed with his head.

Lyrus glowered at the ground. "You call yourself a salvager. You claim that Parona will be destroyed?"

"This is a castle floating in the sky. You came out of a cloudwall. You're heading for another cloudwall. You'll never come back."

Closing his eyes, Lyrus rubbed his temples. He gritted his teeth. "Where do I come from?" he muttered. "I can't recall where I come from."

"You've probably existed for less than a day," Cole said. "Nobody really knows how you were made."

"Nor do I," Lyrus said. His eyes widened. "No! No, no, no! You speak the truth! I'm a fraud!"

Cole was ready to run. The soldier didn't seem very stable.

"I had no idea," Lyrus said, a little calmer. "I have no past. It seemed I did, before I gave it my attention, but as I examine myself honestly, I have no

history. No childhood. No memories before this place. I pose as an expert on heroism, yet I have accomplished nothing.”

Cole stared at the soldier. He seemed more perplexed than angry or sad.

“Would you mind if we took some stuff?” Cole attempted. “That way, part of Parona can live on.”

Lyrus examined his sword. He stared down at himself, stroking his breastplate with one hand. “I look real enough.” He met eyes with Cole. “Real as you.”

Cole wasn’t sure how to respond.

The soldier looked up at the *Okie Dokie* and beyond to the *Domingo*. “There are fine treasures here. I understand why you salvagers took an interest. But I cannot allow you to take anything without first passing a test.”

Cole sagged a little. Lyrus had been sounding so reasonable. “Why not?”

The soldier straightened. “It is my duty. It is my purpose.”

“Why is it your duty?” Cole pressed. “Who gave you the duty?”

Eyes squeezed shut, Lyrus bowed his head. “I have no answer.”

“Can’t you just drop the act?” Cole asked.

“I’m here to test heroes.”

“What gives you the right to test anyone?”

Lyrus sheathed his sword. “This is my purpose. I may have no past, but I am still Lyrus. I am not deaf to your request. I can be reasonable. I don’t want the treasures of Parona to head needlessly into oblivion. There may be some room for bargaining. But a test must be passed.”

“We’re not heroes,” Cole said. “My job is to run from danger, not to fight it.”

“If only,” Lyrus began, and then he looked like he was choking.

“Are you okay?” Cole checked.

The big soldier nodded and steadied himself. “Perhaps,” he started again, then couldn’t finish.

“You can’t tell me,” Cole realized.

Lyrus nodded.

“You want to help me?”

“Yes.”

Cole had a devious thought. “Don’t run away from this. Don’t back down. If you want to help, there must be a way around it.”

The soldier’s expression grew intent and serious. His lips moved as if to speak several times before he said, “I’m chilly.”

“What?”

Lyrus gave him a level gaze. “You don’t know what you have. I’m chilly.” His eyes dropped a little.

Cole fingered his shawl. “This?”

Lyrus trembled but said nothing.

Cole sheathed the sword and unclasped the shawl. Lyrus knelt, and Cole put the shawl over his shoulders, clasping it.

“Is that better?” Cole asked.

Lyrus smiled. “Much better.”

“Why?”

“The cloak makes a semblance obey whoever puts it on them.”

Cole blinked. “You know you’re a semblance?”

“Not until you gave me the cloak. It freed me to know what I had to know in order to serve you. Whoever made me caused me to ignore my true nature. You were helping me catch glimpses, but now I see plainly. Until you gave me the cloak, I didn’t realize I had been fabricated. This is common with semblances. We play a role without much self-reflection. It helps us seem more authentic.”

“Who made you?” Cole asked, wondering if he could answer now.

Lyrus furrowed his brow. “I still don’t know. I’d tell you if I did. I’ve never met my maker. I sprang into being along with Parona not long ago.”

“A semblance gave me this shawl. How could she take it off if it controlled her?”

Folding his arms, Lyrus paused before answering. “In a place like Parona, we semblances form a system. Some semblances are allowed more leeway than others. The semblance you encountered must have had the freedom to decide how best to preserve the system. I myself enjoy similar freedoms.”

The explanation matched Merva’s behavior. It clarified why she might have been the only one to offer him her shawl. “Wait. You wanted me to give you the shawl so you could help me?”

“I’ve become more self-aware than my creator expected,” Lyrus said. “After you helped me recognize my origin, I turned my bravery against the cognitive limits my shaper had placed on me. The effort opened my eyes to many things, but there were some mental boundaries I couldn’t cross. I recognized what your shawl could do when I first saw you. It was why I asked about it—to see if you were aware. Without the shawl, my options were

limited. But with it, more becomes possible. To be honest, helping you was only a small portion of my intent.”

“Then why point out the shawl?”

Lyrus stood tall. “I want the chance to prove my worth. If you command it, I’ll take the test for you. I’ll serve as your champion.”

## CHAPTER

# 12

## HEROICS

“**Y**ou can take the test?” Cole asked.

“I can with the shawl,” Lyrus replied. “If you wish.”

“You want to?”

“I am Lyrus. The instant I realized I was unproven, I craved nothing more than this opportunity.”

“If you pass the test, we can have the treasure?”

Lyrus drummed his fingers against his breastplate. “It will require bargaining.”

“Can’t I just order you to give us the treasure?”

“You could. But regardless of how you command me, I cannot force the other semblances of Parona to let you claim any rewards unless a test has been completed. Even with my full cooperation, if you try to take treasure without completing a test, the full defenses of Parona will engage, including the catapults and the ferocious beasts. However, if we strike a bargain, with me speaking for all Parona . . .”



“So let’s bargain,” Cole said.

“Allow me to remove the shawl so I can act as the guardian of Parona. Our bargain would not be binding to the others if I were under your control during the negotiation.”

“How do I know you’ll put the shawl back on?”

“You have my word.”

Cole thought about that. The soldier was still wearing the shawl, so he had to obey orders. “I command you to tell me if you can lie to me.”

“I cannot lie. With or without the shawl, I keep my word. I want to bargain so I can face the trial for you and earn you access to our treasures.”

“All right,” Cole said. “Take off the shawl.”

Lyrus removed the shawl and draped it over one arm. “You wish to bargain for full access to our treasures?”

“They won’t do anyone much good if they’re destroyed.”

“True. I need your name.”

“Cole.”

“What are the chances of other heroes coming here before Parona is no more?”

“None,” Cole said. “Only salvagers can reach you. And we run if things get bad.”

“Very well. With little chance of another hero visiting, and with Parona facing destruction, on behalf of all the guardians who dwell here, I will make a deal that grants the crew of your airship full access to our treasures—on one condition.”

“What?”

“You must pledge that, along with my other responsibilities, I can remain a protector of Parona whether or not I am wearing the shawl.”

Cole hesitated. “Would that mean you would stop protecting me?”

“No matter what happens, I vow to fight to the death to protect you. Remaining a protector of Parona would not enable me to alter any agreement we make. But I cannot allow your crew full access unless I know someone will be able to act in the interests of Parona. Otherwise, by the terms of this arrangement, Parona will be left unguarded.”

“You won’t attack any of us?”

“I pledge that I will not attack you or your crewmates. As promised, I would defend you.”

“What about the other semblances?”

“The other semblances will not be able to attack you for coming here or for taking anything. They must honor this agreement. I speak for all Parona.”

Cole felt satisfied that Lyrus was being straightforward. “What is the agreement exactly?”

“If you pass one of the tests, using whatever aid is at your disposal, the treasures of Parona will be yours for the taking. After a single trial is won, the guardians of our treasure cannot move against you or your crewmates for setting foot here or for removing anything.”

“Including the floatstones,” Cole verified.

“Anything.”

“And you’ll help me pass the test.”

“I have sworn it.”

“Deal.”

“Including my condition?”

“Yes. You’ll still be the protector of Parona.”

Lyrus gave a single slow nod. “The bargain is struck. I can now put on the shawl if you desire.”

“Sure.”

Grinning, Lyrus clasped the shawl around his neck. “Come, young salvager. Let’s select a trial.”

Cole followed Lyrus up broad, shallow steps into one of the larger buildings. The rectangular structure contained a single room with no walls—just columns on all sides and a roof overhead. At one end of the room, on a platform, sat five large bowls in a row.

Lyrus took a torch from a sconce and led Cole to the row of bowls. “Choose which I should light.”

“Don’t you know what test you want?”

“I know which trial pertains to each bowl. I know which fight would be easiest. But only a coward would deliberately pick the easiest. I yearn for the hardest fight—Gromar the cyclops. But is that fair to you? I would be more likely to fail. As your champion, it would be selfish to select Gromar. So I will abide by your choice.”

Cole considered the five bowls. They appeared identical. “Second from the left,” he said, pointing.

“Ah,” Lyrus said weightily. He walked forward and dipped the torch into the bowl. Crimson flames rose up, red as blood. “Harano the Lion. I should have known this would be my trial. It will be a good fight. Be ready to flee. I will get no second chance against this opponent.”

Lyrus led Cole to a large empty square surrounded by eight buildings. Looking up, Cole saw the *Okie Dokie* following at a distance. He cupped a hand beside his mouth. "If he loses, I'll need to get out of here fast!"

Eli gave a thumbs-up.

Lyrus directed Cole with a gesture. "Wait on the perimeter." He proceeded to the middle of the square, drew his sword, and raised his voice. "Harano, come forth! Slay me if you can."

From one of the buildings surrounding the square, there emerged a huge lion with red-gold fur and a mane that matched the bloodred flames in the bowl. Cole felt an instinctive terror. No fences divided him from this alpha predator. He drew his Jumping Sword.

Head high, advancing with lazy grace, the lion ambled into the square on large paws. The tufted tail swished. On all fours, Harano stood as tall as Lyrus. As the giant cat drew near, the soldier coiled into a fighting stance, sword held ready.

The lion roared, the mighty challenge echoing across Parona. Cole felt the hair on his neck and arms stand up. He glanced at the lifeboat. It hovered just within jumping distance.

Lyrus didn't waver. "Come, Harano," he invited. "Measure yourself against me."

The lion rushed Lyrus with sudden speed. Cole flinched. Harano sprang. Lyrus stepped forward, crouching, and thrust his blade upward. The oversized lion slammed into the soldier, hurling him backward. Both flopped to the ground. Cole heard armor scraping against paving stones.

Man and beast lay still for a few heartbeats. Then Lyrus arose. Bracing one foot against the lion's shaggy head, he removed his sword, yanking it out from under the jaw.

As Lyrus cleaned the sword by wiping it against the luxurious mane, Cole approached cautiously. "Are you all right?"

Lyrus turned and flashed a wide smile. "Now I have a memory worth owning."

"That was incredible."

"I felt alive for the first time. Thank you for that gift. The trial has been won. Our defenses are no longer engaged. You and your comrades are welcome to off-load our treasures."



All three lifeboats shuttled workers down from the *Domingo*. Still wearing the shawl, Lyrus showed them where they could find the armaments, the artwork, and the treasure. While the lifeboats waited in the square where Lyrus had defeated Harano, the raiders began collecting valuables.

Helped by his cane, Durny approached Cole with Mira at his side. "Fine work, Cole. I take it the shawl helped convince that soldier to fight for you?"

"It made him obey me," Cole said. "But I didn't trick him. He wanted me to have control. He wanted to fight. He wanted to prove himself."

"Did you know the shawl could do that?"

"Not until he told me," Cole said. "Lyrus thought he was an expert on heroes. As we spoke, he realized he was a semblance and that he hadn't ever

done anything heroic. He hinted about the shawl so he could have his chance.”

Durny clapped Cole on the shoulder. “Impressive job. Much better to fight with your head than with your hands. Would you care to help us seek out floatstones?”

“Sure. What can I do?”

“Go get my tools from Rowly. That should include a mattock, a pry bar, a hammer, a chisel, and two spades. Bring them and catch up with us.”

“Good job, Cole,” Mira said.

“Thanks.” As Cole turned to find Rowly, his cheeks felt hot. He suspected he was blushing.

A pair of men slowly descended the steps from one of the buildings, holding a huge silver harp between them. Setting it down, they paused to rest. Another man clutched a jeweled scepter in one hand and an ornately framed mirror in the other. A fourth man struggled to carry a stone bust.

Cole spotted Rowly over by the lifeboat called the *Charmer*. He was a round, balding man who wore spectacles. Beyond Rowly, Cole noticed Lyrus climbing the steps to the building where they had lit Harano’s flame.

Why would Lyrus go there?

Frowning, Cole trotted past Rowly, then increased his pace to a jog to catch up to Lyrus. As he hurried up the broad, shallow steps, Cole told himself that he was probably worrying about nothing. At the top of the steps, he looked through the columns to where Lyrus stood across the room, torch in hand, lighting a fourth bowl.

“What are you doing?” Cole yelled, racing into the room.

Lyrus turned. The bowl that had held the red flame was empty. The other four bowls burned green, blue, gray, and black.

“You granted me the right to remain a protector of Parona,” he said.

“You promised to defend me!”

“I will. To the death, if necessary.”

“You promised the guardians wouldn’t attack us if we came for the treasure!”

“Only the dishonorable would break a vow. I pledged they would not attack you for coming here or for taking anything. And they won’t. They’ll attack because, in my role as protector of Parona, I have begun four trials. True to my word, I will strive to defend you. This proving ground deserves to fulfill its purpose.” He grinned. “And I deserve a final chance to test my skills.”

Lyrus started running for the square.

“I command you to stop!” Cole called.

“You pledged I could act in my role of protector,” Lyrus called back. “I do not release you from that promise.”

Cole felt sick and horrified. He had been played! Lyrus was getting everything he wanted—another chance to fight for glory while making sure Parona tested any visitors. The soldier was running toward the square. Where the lifeboats were. Where the creatures would emerge.

Cole ran hard, yelling at the top of his voice. “Watch out! Emergency! Get to the boats! Take off!”

Some of the raiders moved toward Lyrus as the soldier dashed into the square, shawl flapping behind him. The warrior paid them no mind, calling

in a mighty voice, “Skelock, Rulad, Nimbria, and Gromar, come forth!”

Creatures emerged from buildings on three sides of the square: a black rhino, horn lowered, charging hard; a spider bigger than a lifeboat, gray and hairy; a huge green serpent with a head the size of a barrel; and a muscular cyclops that was more than twice the height of a man. Lyrus held his sword high. “Come, Rulad; come, Skelock; come, Nimbria and Gromar! Defeat me if you can!”

The creatures converged on Lyrus. The rhino reached him first, but the soldier sprang aside and brought his sword down in a vicious sweep, nearly decapitating the beast. The enormous serpent came next, rearing up high above Lyrus, staying beyond the reach of his sword.

The discordant clang of a dropped harp roused Cole from watching the fight. The men with the harp had abandoned the instrument and were now climbing inside a lifeboat. Two of the boats lifted off the ground. Other empty-handed raiders came racing from a couple of the buildings. A few of them jumped into the last boat as it took off.

When Cole looked back to the fight, the towering cyclops was ignoring Lyrus and charging toward the lifeboats, as was the supersized tarantula. The snake shifted sinuously, head jerking from one position to another, trying to strike, but Lyrus kept his sword in the way. The warrior tried to press forward, but the snake kept sliding back, giving him ground.

An oversized arrow streaked down from above, piercing the center of the tarantula and poking out its other side. The hairy spider clenched into a quivering ball.



An instant after the javelin skewered the spider, catapults appeared all around Parona, rising as hatches opened on rooftops and patios. Without anyone apparently operating them, the catapults launched balls of flaming pitch at the *Domingo*. The skycraft lurched up and away from Parona, but not before a pair of fires started on the hull.

Club raised to strike, the cyclops closed in on the lifeboats. A few arrows from the boats flew at the brute, lodging in its hairy clothes. One sank into its shoulder. The cyclops didn't seem to mind.

As all three lifeboats banked up and away, the catapults swiveled to target them. The cyclops jumped and swung its club, just missing the lowest boat. Two men who had been dashing for the boats tried to reverse their direction and make for the buildings, but the cyclops chased them down, crushing one with a downward blow and then swatting the other man a ridiculous distance through the air, his body landing in a crumpled heap.

Lyrus sprinted at the snake. Its mouth gaped wide, showing slender fangs bigger than bananas. While gliding away on writhing coils, the serpent struck at the soldier repeatedly and got slashed with every attack. Then the tail whipped around the warrior's legs, and the massive snake encircled him, closing from all directions, wrapping him up while striking furiously.

The cyclops ran toward Cole, and he realized that his moment as a bystander was over. It was all happening so quickly, and he felt so much responsibility, that he had nearly forgotten he needed to escape as well.

Raising his sword toward the nearest lifeboat, Cole shouted, "Away!" He soared upward at the same time as many spheres of flaming pitch. One fireball passed close enough for him to feel its hot backwash. The fiery

projectiles missed the boat, and Cole landed neatly inside. The boat contained Jed, Eli, and two others, along with a few treasures.

“They’ll skin us if we leave Durny!” Eli yelled.

Jed turned the boat and swooped lower. “We’re going to get roasted,” he grumbled.

“Give him one chance,” Eli insisted.

Cole leaned over the side, peering ahead. He had nearly forgotten Durny and Mira! They had gone off on their own.

Mira and the older man were running away from the lifeboat down a paved lane between two buildings. Durny moved as best he could on his bad leg, stabbing the ground with his cane. The spider was chasing them, the ballista’s arrow protruding from its body. Cole thought it had been a lethal shot. Apparently not.

The speedy tarantula gained rapidly. Durny was a poor sprinter. Mira stayed near him, urging him on. He waved for her to run ahead.

Another volley of fiery pitch blazed into the air. Jed dipped the lifeboat down and to the side as several blistering projectiles roared past. One of the lifeboats that had managed to climb high took a direct hit and burst apart. Cole glimpsed burning bodies falling amid shattered wood. The boat had passed beyond the borders of Parona, so none of the people or debris hit the ground.

The *Okie Dokie* was gaining on Durny and Mira. Cole’s attention returned to them in time to see the tarantula leap forward. It landed on Durny, and a furry leg clipped Mira as well, sending her to the ground, the Jumping Sword clattering from her grasp. The tarantula tilted down, as if biting Durny.

The shaper cried out, and the tarantula tore in half, black gore erupting in all directions. Advancing faster than Cole had ever seen a lifeboat move, Jed brought the boat in low. Eli leaned over the side and reached a hand for Durny. Their fingers brushed, and Eli shouted in frustration.

Cole looked back at Mira and Durny, both of them drenched in spider juice. Club held high, the cyclops was charging at them. Mira crawled toward her Jumping Sword, but it was clear the cyclops would reach her first.

“Go,” Eli growled. “They’re lost.”

The cyclops was only a few paces away from Mira and Durny. They were going to be pulverized.

Without time to think or plan, Cole aimed his sword at the head of the cyclops. “Away!”

Cole sprang from the lifeboat and sailed toward the one-eyed giant. Air rushed over him as he rocketed toward his target. Oblivious to the incoming threat, the cyclops glared down at Mira and Durny. The sword slowed Cole a little as he neared the brutish head. Straining forward, he stabbed the center of the cyclops’s big blue eye, the momentum of the jump adding considerable power to his thrust. The sword disappeared, and so did his arm—all the way up to the elbow. It felt as if he had punched a deep bowl of warm pudding.

The cyclops collapsed beneath him, landing on its back. Cole kept hold of the sword through the jolting impact. Stunned, he lay atop the fallen giant, watching thick blood well from the ruined eye. He was alive. The cyclops was not.

CHAPTER

— 13 —

## FLOATSTONES

The sword did not come out easily, but with effort, Cole wrenched it free. Rattled, he slid off the cyclops and stumbled away from the fallen brute, arm and sword red and dripping.

He found Mira on her feet, soaked in black gore, sword in hand, her expression a mask of disbelief. “Cole?”

Beyond her, the *Okie Dokie* had flown past the edge of Parona, diving now instead of climbing as another barrage of flaming pitch flared toward it. Their ride sank out of view.

Cole turned away from her, eyes scouring the empty lane. “There’s a snake.”

“Snake?” Durny moaned.

“Durny?” Mira called.

“Are you all right?” Cole asked in surprise.

“What snake?” Durny demanded.

“A gigantic one,” Cole said. “Last I saw, it was killing Lyrus.”

Mira crouched beside Durny. "Are you hurt? Can you get up?"

Biting his lower lip, he gave his head a little shake. "I doubt it. Give me a moment." He closed his eyes and began rubbing his torso while muttering quietly.

"What's he doing?" Cole whispered.

"Trying to heal himself with shaping," Mira said. "Not usually smart. It must be bad."

Cole looked down the lane both ways. "The snake is big. And fast. We can't fight it." He glanced up. "It could come at us from a roof."

"Durny?" Mira asked.

"I won't make it," he panted. "Use me as bait. Cole, when it consumes me, strike at it from hiding. Take off the head."

"No," Mira insisted. "If you die, we'll die. They left us."

"They may return," Durny said.

"Not unless the catapults run out of ammo," Cole said. "I saw one lifeboat go down. The *Domingo* was on fire."

Durny looked at the sky. Only a strip of partly clouded blue was visible because of the buildings on either side. The *Domingo* and the lifeboats were out of sight. "You're probably right. We're on our own. And we're too vulnerable here. We should get indoors. You'll have to drag me."

"Aaaargh!" yelled a voice from down the lane. Armor scraped and dented, Lyrus had stumbled into view. He staggered toward them. "Who killed Gromar?"

"What about the snake?" Cole called.

"I dispatched Nimbia," Lyrus declared, "though she did herself proud."

“The snake is dead?” Mira asked.

“Headless and squirming.”

“Is that the last of the guardians?” Cole asked.

“The catapults will continue to defend Parona until the end,” Lyrus said.

“I did not activate them. When your ship fired upon Skelock, the response was unavoidable. You had permission to come here and remove treasure, not to attack from the sky.”

“Can you shut down the catapults?” Durny wondered.

“They’re beyond my control.”

“Will the catapults shoot at us?” Cole asked.

“Only if you’re airborne.”

As the warrior neared them, Cole saw large wide-spaced punctures in his breastplate. Blood flowed from the holes. “You’re injured,” Cole said.

“I’m dying,” Lyrus gasped. “I won’t last much longer.” He lifted his chin. “But I vowed to protect you until the end.” When he reached the cyclops, the soldier kicked its head. “I wanted to measure myself against Gromar. Who slew him?”

“Cole,” Mira said.

“You?” Lyrus shouted.

Cole held up the gory sword.

“With that tiny blade?”

Cole nodded.

“I misjudged you,” Lyrus said. “I’m most impressed.”

“Come here,” Durny said.

“I obey Cole,” Lyrus said.

“Do it,” Cole said.

Lyrus went and knelt beside Durny. The warrior eyed the two mangled halves of the tarantula. “How was this accomplished?”

“I’m a shaper,” Durny said. “Semblances are somewhat vulnerable to me. With the spider on top of me, I put everything I had into parting it. I’ve never accomplished such a feat before. It took a lot out of me.”

“How badly are you hurt?” Cole asked.

“It landed right on me,” Durny said. “My spine is broken. I have crushed organs. It also bit me twice. I neutralized the toxin and reshaped my insides to buy some time. I succeeded, but the actions I took guaranteed that my injuries will be fatal.”

“I don’t have much longer myself,” Lyrus said.

“Cole,” Durny spat. “Ask him if he harbors any other plans that could directly or indirectly harm you or Mira in any way.”

Cole wished he had used that question earlier. “Do you?”

“I have no such plans,” Lyrus said. “My duty as protector of Parona is complete. All defenses have already been engaged, and of course I will honor my pledge to personally do you no harm.”

“You won’t send any more tests our way?” Cole pressed.

“None,” the soldier answered.

“Give me your hand,” Durny said. After a nod from Cole, Lyrus complied. Durny closed his eyes, and beads of sweat appeared on his brow. His lips moved without sound.

The soldier’s eyes widened. “What have you done?”

“I quelled the venom, closed some wounds, and patched some damaged bones,” Durny said, releasing his hand. “It’s much easier to tinker with a semblance than a living being. Parona will not outlast you.”

“What now?” Mira asked.

“The catapults are no longer firing,” Durny said, eyes on Lyrus.

“They cease operating when no targets are within range,” the soldier said.

“Will they start again if a skycraft approaches?” Durny asked.

“They’re active now. They’ll target all newcomers.”

“How much ammunition do the catapults have?”

“Enough to fire continually until Parona disappears.”

“Is there any chance of Captain Post trying to rescue us?” Cole asked.

Durny closed his eyes. “Not under these circumstances. Few castles resist airborne intruders. This one resists them staunchly. The Sky Raiders don’t want to lose their most skilled shaper, but they wouldn’t send rescuers against defenses like this, not for anyone, not even for Adam.”

Cole looked at Mira. Were they doomed? Would they drift away into the cloudwall to be destroyed with the rest of Parona? “There must be something we can do.”

Durny opened his eyes. “Of course there is. I’m holding on to life for a reason. We must construct our own skycraft. It will require a minimum of five floatstones. Seven would be preferable. And we’ll need something to serve as the vessel itself.”

“We could use your help,” Cole told Lyrus.

“You’ll have it,” the soldier said.

“I don’t suppose you retrieved any of my tools?” Durny asked Cole.



“They were in one of the lifeboats that got away,” he said.

“Which lifeboat didn’t make it?” Mira wondered.

“The *Melody* got tagged by a catapult,” Cole said. “It blew apart. The men fell.”

“Did the debris land on Parona?” Durny asked hopefully.

“No, it missed.”

Durny frowned. “This mission is our biggest disaster in years.”

Cole felt terrible. “I really blew it.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Durny said. “You’ve helped us more than duty demanded. All raiders know the risks. I interviewed Lyrus, as did Rowly. We failed to ask the right question. Your champion hid his intentions well.”

“I grieve for your losses,” Lyrus said. “I was doing my duty.”

Durny studied Lyrus. “How well do you know Parona?”

“Almost as if we were one and the same.”

“Could you help us locate seven of the most available floatstones? The nodes that keep Parona aloft? We need to extract them with a minimum of digging and without bringing buildings down on top of us.”

“We can access some in the catacombs,” Lyrus said. “Six for certain, as long as we harvest them from different areas. The seventh would start to make things unstable.”

“I can manage with five,” Durny said. “I’ll need to be carried. I’m paralyzed from the waist down, and Mira lacks the know-how to extract floatstones on her own.”

Lyrus scooped Durny from the ground, cradling the injured shaper in his arms. The soldier looked to Cole.

“Take us to the first floatstone,” Cole ordered.

The soldier started walking. Cole and Mira followed.

“Pray that Parona drifts slowly today,” Durny said. “And pray I’m wrong about the look of these clouds.”



By the time they had extracted the fifth floatstone, night had fallen, and rain poured down on Parona. None of the fires had gone out in any of the torches, bowls, kettles, or platters scattered throughout Parona, whether indoors or outdoors. Droplets spat and hissed as they came into contact with the open flames.

The wind had risen, blowing the raindrops diagonally. No stars were visible. The temperature had fallen considerably.

Cole had felt useless while they hunted for floatstones. The catacombs beneath Parona connected into an elaborate labyrinth, allowing his group to move from one floatstone to the next without returning to the surface. Along most of the webby, convoluted corridors, skulls, partial skeletons, and other strange bones were embedded into the waxy walls. At each extraction site, Lyrus would strip away wax, fungi, and filth until he had laid bare the stone wall or floor. Mira gave Durny some support, but he did the heavy work, dividing the stone with his mind and holding it open while Mira pulled out the floatstone, then sealing the stone back up again as best he could.

Each floatstone was a mirrorlike disk with rounded edges, no bigger than a dinner plate, maybe three or four inches thick. Cole’s job was to carry them. When he let go of a floatstone, it hovered in place, perfectly stationary. The

floatstones resisted movement. He learned that they offered less resistance when he moved them slowly.

After helping Mira collect the fifth floatstone, Durny had slumped back, his pale face gaunt and slick with sweat. Cole doubted whether he could have extracted seven of these even if they had been readily available.

They had emerged from the catacombs some time ago. Durny rested on the floor, eyes closed, his breathing shallow but steady. They were waiting for Lyrus to return with something they could use as a skycraft. All the buildings were sparsely furnished, and so much of Parona was made of stone that they had yet to come across anything suitable. The soldier had assured them that he had some ideas.

“What a mess.” Cole sighed, staring beyond the colonnade to the steam hissing up from the rain-lashed fires spaced about the patio. “I’m so sorry.”

“You saved my life,” Mira said. “Durny’s, too.”

“Whatever. If you say so.”

He felt her hand on his shoulder. “Why’d you do it?” she asked earnestly. “Why risk your life for me? You were in a lifeboat. You could have escaped.”

Cole turned. She looked perplexed. He had asked himself the same question a couple of times while they roamed the catacombs seeking floatstones. He felt a little guilty about the chance he had taken. After all, Jenna and Dalton needed his help too. If he got himself killed, who would rescue them? “I didn’t want to see you get squished. It would have been my fault.”

She shook her head. “We’re slaves, Cole. You came here because they forced you. If you want to place blame, give it to the owners of the Sky

Raiders. No matter what goes wrong, you don't deserve any of it."

"Maybe you're right," Cole said. "Still, I couldn't watch you get killed. I just couldn't. I saw it coming. I saw a chance to stop it, so I tried. There wasn't time to think it through. I can hardly believe it worked."

"Well, it was the bravest thing anyone has ever done for me. And the least expected. Thank you." She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Cole suddenly found it difficult to breathe properly. He had never felt more self-conscious, or more pleased. He told his mouth not to spread into a big goofy smile, but the muscles in his cheeks wouldn't listen.

"Aha!" Lyrus called. "To the victor go the spoils!"

Flustered, Cole tried not to look surprised and embarrassed. The brawny soldier was dragging something into the room. Maybe he was talking about the potential skycraft he had found. "What?"

"You saved a damsel in distress," Lyrus said. "I may never have that pleasure. You speak like a coward but act like a hero. I can respect that."

Lyrus set down the box. It was a large coffin in the traditional shape, widening to accommodate the shoulders, then narrowing toward the feet, like an elongated hexagon. Except it seemed to be built for an eight-foot-tall occupant.

"Where'd you find that?" Cole asked.

"In one of the crypts. There were plenty of smaller ones. You should have seen the skeleton. It had the head of a bull. A minotaur, most like."

Mira ran a hand along the side of the open box. "Feels sturdy. It hasn't rotted."

"I hope it serves," Lyrus said.

Mira gently shook Durny. The shaper smacked his lips and opened his eyes. He looked over at the coffin, then propped himself up on one elbow and squinted intently. “Oh dear. A bit morbid, isn’t it? But it will have to suffice.” He looked to Lyrus. “How much time do we have?”

“The storm has hastened our progress,” the soldier replied. “Not more than two hours.”

Durny sighed. “I had hoped the children could wait for the storm to relent before departing. We’ll have to work quickly, and you two will have to risk the turbulent air.”

“Won’t you come with us?” Mira pleaded.

“There would be no sense in it,” Durny insisted. “It’ll take the last of my vitality to make this skyworthy on such a short schedule. I won’t last many more hours. Better for me to bow out gracefully than spend my final moments as deadweight.”

“You have to try,” Mira said. “Maybe they can heal you. Maybe—”

Durny held out a hand. “Please don’t weary me further. We have no time to waste. You don’t understand the damage inside of me. I shaped myself in unnatural ways. It bought me some extra hours of life, but nobody could heal me now. I have no desire to die—there is simply no way around it. Give me the floatstones. Cole, might I have a private word with you?”

“Sure,” Cole said.

While Mira and Lyrus moved to the far side of the room, Cole crouched down beside Durny. “You must look after her,” the older man whispered urgently.

“I’ll try,” Cole said.

“I can’t explain everything, for it isn’t my place, but there is much more to that girl than meets the eye. My mission in life has been to protect her. My role as shaper for the Sky Raiders was merely a cover for that vital purpose. But I will no longer be able to watch over her. This is a terrible time for me to leave her. She will be unacceptably vulnerable without me. The others at Skyport won’t shield her as I have. None know her value. You must keep her safe at all cost.”

His intensity left Cole surprised. He knew Mira was Durny’s apprentice, but he hadn’t realized the old guy felt so strongly about her. “Are you related?”

“Not by blood,” Durny said. “I have no right to tell you more. My life ends here, tonight. Promise me you’ll watch over her.”

Cole wasn’t sure he could watch out for *himself* in a place like Skyport. But he liked Mira, and Durny needed assurance. “I’ll do my best. I promise.”

Durny looked relieved. He nodded slowly. “You’re a good lad. Thank you for coming back for her. Protect her with that same courage, and she will be in good hands.” He raised his voice. “We’re done. Cole, why don’t you go claim some weapons or treasure? I would have private words with Mira.”

## CHAPTER

# 14

## STORM BLOWN

**F**ollowing instructions from Durny, Lyrus turned the coffin on its side near him. Then the soldier led Cole away.

“Durny is meeting his end bravely,” Lyrus said.

“He’d be fine if it wasn’t for you,” Cole replied.

“Did I bring him here? Did I bring you? This is a proving ground for heroes.”

“Just doing your job, right? You picked a bad time to be so good at it.”

“I gave you what help I could.”

“I’m surprised you beat that snake. It looked like it had you.”

“It did have me,” Lyrus said. “In the end I took its head, but not before it did fatal damage. Had Durny not restored me, I would be dead. In truth, my contest with Nimbria ended as a draw. What surprised me was you besting Gromar.”

Cole had cleaned his sword, but the sleeve of his buckskin jacket remained crusted with dried blood. “It surprised me too.”

“You proved yourself,” Lyrus said. “You deserve to be rewarded. What manner of prizes would you prefer?”

“Do you have any special weapons?” Cole asked. “You know, that are shaped to do useful things? Or treasures with secret abilities, like my cloak?”

“You’re wise to ask. There are three such items: a painting that foretells the next day’s weather, a jewel that will always return to the first person who kisses it, and a bow that requires no arrows. They were prepared to reward discerning eyes, but you asked, and I wear your shawl, so I would be glad to give them to you.”

Using the catacombs to avoid the rain, they visited three different treasure rooms, all lit by candles and torches. Lyrus carefully wrapped the painting in cloth. Cole kissed the jewel as soon as he claimed it. After receiving the bow, he tested it by pulling the string. Once the string was back far enough, an arrow appeared.

Lyrus took custody of the painting and the bow, freeing Cole to collect other treasures. He tried to choose items that might make the Sky Raiders happy, including a small heavy chest loaded with jewels and gold coins. He put rings on every finger and wore several pendants. Lyrus also recommended a pair of hooded cloaks to help against the rain. It was hard for Cole to tear himself away from investigating the treasure hoards, but Lyrus finally informed him that they had less than half an hour before Parona would reach the cloudwall.

Upon returning to where they had left Durny and Mira, Cole found Durny facedown on the floor. Mira knelt at his side. By the torchlight in the



room, Cole could see the shiny tracks of tears on her cheeks. Her eyes were puffy and red. "He's gone."

"I'm sorry," Cole said.

"Did he finish the skycraft?" Lyrus asked.

"He died as he finished it," Mira said. "He warned me that he might. We can't steer it, but that shouldn't be necessary. The coffin will fly itself to the salvage yard. It was the safest destination he could give us. The cliffside entrances will be sealed at night."

"You should depart," Lyrus said. "Time runs short."

"Do you want to come with us?" Cole asked.

"I would not survive the journey," Lyrus said. "Better that I remain here where I belong."

"Durny told me we should launch the boat from the edge of Parona," Mira said.

"He was right," Lyrus agreed. "Once you're airborne, the catapults will target you. The storm should wreak havoc with their aim, but why take needless risks?"

"Seriously?" Cole snapped. "That's your advice? You just fought monsters on purpose!"

Lyrus shrugged. "She's a maiden. And you can't fight a ball of flame. Cole, I should return your shawl."

"Let's wait until we take off," Cole said. "Just to be safe."

"Very well."

They situated the items they were taking into the coffin. Cole and Mira put on their cloaks. Lyrus picked up one side of the coffin and dragged it out

into the rain. Cole followed, the rain pattering against his hood. The wind gusted hard enough to make the walk laborious.

“Not the night I’d choose to go flying in a minotaur’s coffin,” Cole said to Mira, speaking loudly to be heard over the storm.

“I’ve had some bad days with the Sky Raiders,” Mira said. “But this one takes the prize.”

They followed Lyrus until he left the coffin at the edge of a patio and stepped back. Beyond where the patio ended, the night was impenetrably dark.

“What now?” Cole asked.

Mira stepped inside the coffin. “We get in and I tell it to go.”

Cole got in as well. The coffin was fairly deep, which offered some security, but the only things to really hold on to were the sides. It was like sitting in a primitive canoe.

“Would you like the shawl now?” Lyrus asked.

“Yes, please,” Cole replied.

The soldier removed the shawl, handed it over, and stepped back. “Luck be with you.”

“Die bravely,” Mira said.

“Die bravely,” Cole repeated.

Lyrus straightened to full attention. “Count on it. Live well.”

“Skyport!” Mira yelled.

The coffin lurched forward. Cole gripped the sides tightly. The improvised skycraft flew swiftly, rocking, bucking, and fishtailing as it was buffeted by the swirling wind.

The catapults started firing. Comets of flame illuminated the darkness, though no shot came close to them. Three more volleys were launched, each more hopeless than the last. Soon all light from the fires of Parona were lost behind them.

Only the dark tempest remained.

Between their speed and the gusting wind, rain whipped Cole violently. Tucking his head down, he braced himself against the sides of the coffin. He felt like a paper airplane in a tornado. Sometimes the coffin lurched forward, sometimes it stalled, sometimes it dove, sometimes it climbed, and sometimes it spun. Often it tipped almost sideways, though never upside down. There was no predicting how it would move, so Cole hung on with all his strength.

Cole measured time by each second that he didn't go flying freely into the storm, plummeting toward forever, surrounded by raindrops. There was no lightning or thunder, but the wind raged, and the rain seemed determined to drown him.

He had no chance to exchange words with Mira. She sat close enough that he occasionally bumped against her, which served as his only clue that he was not alone in the coffin.

As their wild flight stretched on and on, Cole began to doubt whether they would ever reach their destination. There was no way to gauge if the skycraft was moving in the right direction. They could be blown farther off course with every gust. All he could do was hold tight as the coffin reared, plunged, turned, twisted, pitched, heaved, shook, wobbled, jerked, slowed, accelerated, and curveted.

His hands grew numb from the cold. In spite of his cloak, his clothes were drenched. His muscles ached from the strain of holding on. His body throbbed from the constant jarring. He shifted a bit, trying to find new ways to brace himself.

The storm refused to relent. There was no shelter. The merciless fury was all around them. Time lost all meaning. Cole stopped hoping that it would ever end. He just held on.

He didn't know they had reached their destination until the coffin thumped down in the salvage yard. Looking around, he could see the lit windows of Skyport perhaps fifty yards away. The rain still bucketed down, and the wind continued to howl.

Mira kept her head down.

"We're here!" Cole called.

She looked up, then shakily climbed out of the coffin. "We have to get indoors."

Cole took the time to collect his shawl and the bow. He had made sure to sit on them.

He checked the coffin for the other items he had brought. It was too dark to be sure, but it looked like everything else was gone, including the chest of coins and the enchanted painting.

Cole followed Mira through the gloomy, wet salvage yard, shoes squelching in muddy puddles as he navigated around sheds and other shadowy obstacles. When they reached the porch, he tossed the bow and the shawl underneath it while Mira climbed the steps. He had worked hard for them and was in no hurry to give them away.

He caught up to Mira as she pounded on the door. "It's locked," she told him as he approached.

At least on the porch they were out of the rain, though the wind clawed at them. Cole was about to tell her nobody would be able to hear them over the storm when the locks started to disengage. Eli opened the door.

"We'd all lost hope!" he exclaimed with a grin, stepping aside so they could enter. "Durny?"

Mira shook her head. "Just us."

His face fell a little. Then he swatted Cole with the back of his hand. "Did you have a nice landing on that cyclops?"

"Nicer for me than for it," Cole said.

Eli shook his head. "You're absolutely mad. But here you are. The Maker protects fools and children. Adam will want to see you. He had some of us waiting up, in case you showed."

Eli led them to the common area where Adam sat on his jade throne. The warm air made Cole more conscious of how wet and cold he was.

"Oh ho!" Adam bellowed. "The castaways return! I had a feeling you might resurface. Is the shaper with you?"

"He didn't make it," Eli reported.

Adam scowled. "What? The man built a skycraft, then forgot to board?"

"He died making it," Mira said. "He was crushed by a huge spider. It took all he had to last as long as he did."

Adam banged a fist on the arm of his throne. "This is why you don't send your best shaper to collect floatstones. We have three less capable men who could have handled that errand. But given a full year and a death threat, not

one of them could produce a Jumping Sword. Shame on me for letting Durny talk me into it. Anything can happen out there. You two look like drowned kittens. You're otherwise unwounded?"

"We're all right," Cole said.

"Must have been a white-knuckle ride." Adam chuckled. "I can hardly imagine. How'd you navigate back here?"

"Durny rigged the coffin to find the salvage yard," Mira said.

Adam shook his head. "That man has forgotten more about shaping than most will ever know. A corpse box, you say? Not the friendliest omen."

"It's out in the yard," Cole said.

"You bring back any goods?" Adam wondered.

Cole tried not to dwell on the bow and shawl he had chucked under the porch. "We tried. I think most of it fell out. It's dark out there."

"You have some jewelry," Adam noted.

Cole grinned sheepishly. "That's right." He had forgotten the pendants and the rings. He started taking them off.

"Princely adornments. The two lifeboats that survived also off-loaded some nice finds. We'll fly the *Vulture* while we make repairs to the *Domingo*. If nothing else, your boneholder should have some floatstones we can salvage. Cole, I understand you went back to help Durny and Mira after boarding a lifeboat."

"He saved us," Mira said. "The spider left us stunned, and a cyclops would have finished us. Cole killed it."

"Not a bright move," Adam said. "Most days, that would lead to three corpses instead of two. But it's the kind of stupidity I can admire."

“Thanks,” Cole said. “I think.”

Adam winked. “You two had a tough night. Take the day off tomorrow, and I mean completely—no chores, no responsibilities. Go dry off and get some sleep.”

## CHAPTER

# 15

## MIRA

**C**ole could sense the sunlight through his eyelids. The sleep felt so good that he didn't want to wake, but he peeked with one eye, then the other.

Daylight poured through the window. The room was empty. The other bunks were made.

Jace's bunk had been empty when Cole came to bed the night before. The two other boys had been asleep. After putting on dry clothes and curling up under his covers, Cole had slept undisturbed.

He kicked his legs over the side of his bunk and dropped to the floor. Cole hadn't had a true day off since arriving at Skyport. When he wasn't out on a scouting mission, there had been chores to learn and perform. He hardly knew what he would do with a whole day to relax, but breakfast seemed like a sensible start.

In the kitchen, he scraped the bottom of a vat and ladled sticky porridge into a bowl. He grabbed some fruit as well—an apple and some sort of purple citrus. Fruit had been abundant lately.



Cole took his time eating. The common area was deserted. Outside, the sun glared across a blue sky as if the storm had never happened. The *Borrower* and the *Vulture* were probably out raiding.

The purple citrus fruit turned out to be the best part of the meal. Cole went and grabbed a second one. As he walked back to his room, Mira caught up to him from behind.

“Good morning,” she said. “You slept late.”

“Maybe I’ve been up for hours,” Cole said.

“Nope. I looked in at you a few times. We need to talk.”

She sounded serious. Cole tried to think what he might have done wrong. Did she know about the bow and shawl under the porch? He hadn’t taken the time to hide them well. “What’s up?”

Mira stepped closer and lowered her voice. “We mustn’t be overheard. Come with me.”

She led the way down multiple stairways, beyond the basement and into the caves. Although the floors, ceilings, and walls were natural stone, the addition of wooden walkways and steps made travel more convenient. Some areas of the caves had so many rugs, tapestries, and furnishings that Cole could almost forget he was underground.

A narrow offshoot branched from one of the main walkways. At the end they came to a door. Mira paused. “This is my room.”

“Not many doors down here,” Cole observed.

“True. Durny got this room for me. It’s isolated. I don’t bring anyone inside.” She took out a key, unlocked the door, and entered. “Come on.”

Cole followed her in and then stopped in his tracks.

The room was amazing.

A huge canopied bed with silky covers and mounds of pillows stood out the most. Other furniture included an ornate desk, two fancy sofas, a pair of stately armchairs, and a wooden table with matching benches. Beautiful paintings hung on the walls, some wider than his outstretched arms. Fine rugs softened the floor. Statues of animals prowled on shelves and crouched in corners. Crystal lamps made everything bright.

“How’d you get all this great stuff?”

“I made it,” Mira said.

“What?”

“I wove the rugs, painted the pictures, sculpted the animals, and built the furniture.”

Cole took a closer look at a painting. It showed a flying tiger swooping over a pond near a fanciful castle, its reflection somewhat blurred in the rippling water. The image looked beyond professional. “No way. You’re messing with me.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Mira said. “Please don’t mention the crafts I have in here. Durny tried to hide my talents, or Adam would have had me slaving every day as an artisan.”

“You’re serious? You built that bed?”

“Sheets, pillows, everything. Durny lent me some help. I used a little shaping.”

Cole chewed on his bottom lip. “If there was shaping involved, I might start to believe you.”

She sighed despairingly. “If you find *that* hard to believe, just wait.”

“I almost forgot,” Cole said. “There’s more. What do you want to tell me?”

“Have a seat,” Mira invited, sitting down on one of the sofas. Mira was normally so confident, but right now she seemed a little fidgety.

The two sofas were at right angles to each other. Cole sat on the near side of the other one.

“I have . . . some secrets.”

“Okay,” Cole said patiently. “The first step to telling secrets is admitting that you have them.”

Mira looked down. “My secrets could be dangerous, Cole. They could get you into trouble.”

“This place is nothing but trouble. What’s a little more? We’ve been through some harsh stuff already.”

She looked at him intently. “I know. It’s why I know I can trust you. I have to be careful about who I trust. At Parona, you didn’t have to risk your life for me, but you did. I don’t think anything less would let me confide in you. Without Durny, I need somebody on my side. Before he died, he told me it should be you. I think he was right.”

“He asked me to look out for you,” Cole said. “When we talked in private.”

“Should I tell you?”

“You have to now. I’m too curious.”

“It’s not just gossip,” she warned. “These secrets matter. People have died because of them.”

Cole thought about that. His life was already nightmarishly hard. Did he really want more danger? Mira obviously needed him. How bad could it be?

“Go ahead.”

She gave a nervous giggle. “I’ve never talked about this with anyone who didn’t already know most of the story. You’re so new here. I hardly know where to begin.”

“Just go for it.”

“Do you know about Junction? The High Shaper?”

“Is he like the High King?”

“Yes,” Mira said. “The High Shaper is the High King.”

“Then I know he took some of my friends as slaves,” Cole said bitterly.

“Really?” Mira asked.

“Remember? I came here because my friends were kidnapped.”

“Right. But how do you know they were going to the High King?”

“After I was captured, this woman examined me. She said I had no shaping potential. But some of the others—the ones with potential—were set aside for the High King. That included Dalton and Jenna, two of my best friends.”

“Hmmm,” Mira said. “He must need more slaves with shaping talent. That could be good and bad for your friends.”

“How come?”

“Slaves who can shape get the best treatment. And if they’re going to be slaves, the royal palace is more comfortable than most places they could be working. But the High King is a maniac. Anyone who works near him is in danger.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked.

“It ties directly into my secret. What do you know about how the five kingdoms are governed?”

“Nothing. I don’t even really know what they are.”

She nodded. “There are five major kingdoms in the Outskirts: Sambria, where we are now; Necronum; Elloweer; Zeropolis; and Creon. Junction lies more or less between the kingdoms. It’s the capital of the Outskirts. The five kingdoms used to be governed by five Grand Shapers. The High Shaper ranked above them all and lived in Junction City. Together they formed the Governing Council, and they ruled the Outskirts as a group. Except, around sixty years ago, the High Shaper decided he wanted all the power for himself. The Grand Shaper of Zeropolis became his puppet, and the other four went into hiding.”

“Is this the secret?”

“This is the background. You don’t know any of this, do you?”

“No. Who is the High Shaper now?”

“The same guy,” Mira said. “The more advanced shapers have ways to slow the aging process. They can live for hundreds of years.”

“The Grand Shapers are really powerful?”

“They’re usually the best of the best.”

“So what does this have to do with you?”

“I’m getting there. More than sixty years ago, the High Shaper lived with his wife and five daughters. The five girls all showed promise as shapers. Their father, not so much. Although he came from a long line of shapers, and married a woman who was a powerful shaper, he held his position more by

pedigree and political games than by talent. Anyhow, one day, there was a terrible accident, and all his daughters died.”

“What happened?”

“Their carriage went off a bridge into a raging river. It was huge news throughout the Outskirts. All the kingdoms mourned. But I know some secrets about the accident. Secrets that involve the High Shaper. Things he would do anything to cover up.”

“Was he involved?”

Mira stared at Cole in silence. “We’re talking about the most powerful person in all of the Outskirts. And yes, he was behind the accident. He planned it.”

“His own daughters?” Cole asked.

“I don’t think he ever saw them as daughters,” Mira said. “Rivals would be more accurate.”

“The guy killed his own kids?” Cole exclaimed. “And he got away with it?”

“He still rules the Outskirts,” Mira said. “Almost nobody knows what really happened. The High King is ruthless and selfish. He destroyed his own family to get what he wanted. The more his power grows, the more people are seeing that side of him. And his power keeps growing every year. Every day.”

“My friends went to that guy?” Cole asked, feeling ill.

“Hopefully, they won’t work with him directly,” Mira said. “There’s more to the secret, but I shouldn’t share too much yet. The more you know, the more danger you’re in. The High Shaper has killed to keep these secrets and

wouldn't hesitate to kill again. But I wanted you to know enough to appreciate the seriousness of my situation."

"How did you learn this stuff?" Cole asked.

"My mother is close to the High Shaper," Mira said. "I used to live in his palace. She still does. If I say much more, I'll end up telling you everything. My mother sent me away for my safety and then sent Durny to watch over me."

"Were you and your mother slaves?"

"We weren't slaves," Mira said. "I got marked as part of my cover, to help me hide. But whatever the reasons behind my bondmark, having it makes me as much a slave as you or anyone."

Cole rubbed the arm of the sofa. If Mira was willing to become a slave in order to hide, that alone proved her desperation. "Why tell me?"

After glancing at her door, Mira lowered her voice. "Because Durny and I were planning an escape."

"From Skyport?"

She nodded.

"How come?"

"My mom uses a special signal to let me know when trouble is coming," Mira said. "The signal can also guide messengers to me. But she only uses it for emergencies. The signal showed up recently, and Durny decided we needed to relocate."

"What signal?" Cole asked. "What kind of danger is coming?"

Mira studied Cole. "You can't leak a word of this. To anyone. *Ever.*"

"I promise," Cole said.

“My mom is a shaper. She can put a special star in the sky, right above me. Not a bright one, but it has a distinct pinkish tint.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “She can make a star?”

“She doesn’t create an actual star. That wouldn’t even be useful since the sky changes so much. Think of it as the illusion of a star, high up so it blends with the night sky. The first and only time she did it, my star stayed right above me until Durny found me, then it went away.”

“Could enemies follow the star to you?”

“If they knew what to look for. That’s why the secret mustn’t get out. Without help, somebody would have to know the stars really well to even notice it. My star is a distinct color, but pretty faint. Almost nobody really studies the stars here because the night sky behaves so strangely. It would be tricky to single out a new star in all the chaos. Even if a few people noticed the new fixed star, unless they understood what the star meant, there would be no reason for them to follow it and get directly under it.”

“Does your mom know Durny died? Will she send someone else to help you?”

Mira gripped the edge of the sofa. “The signal came before Durny died. I can’t imagine Mother knows I lost my protector. It’s possible the star is leading a messenger to me. But it might only be a warning. In all my years, the one reason she ever put my star in the sky was to guide Durny to me. That was it. But seven nights ago, my star appeared again.”

“Wait a minute,” Cole said. “Is that what you saw? You know, when we were out in the yard by the porch?”



“It was tough to cover up my surprise. I check the stars every night, just in case. There’s never anything there, but I still check. The last thing I expected was to see my little star above me. It scared me.”

“And Durny decided you should run.”

“Yes. In a way, the star caused his death. The star is probably more than a warning, since it has remained in the sky. A warning would only have stayed for a night or two. But since the star moves with me, a messenger could follow us wherever we went. After I told Durny about the star, he wanted to gather some floatstones to make a skycraft.”

“Why not just steal a lifeboat?” Cole wondered.

“Runaway slaves get treated harshly,” Mira said. “The Sky Raiders would be angry enough without us stealing from them. According to our plan, while collecting floatstones, Durny would have smuggled some extras. He would have assembled the skycraft outside of Skyport so we could leave at any time. We would have flown our little skycraft to the end of the Brink, near one of the cloudwalls, let it fall off the edge once we were done with it, and headed inland on foot. We would have disappeared without a trace.”

Cole leaned forward on the couch. “Do you still want to make a run for it?”

“I don’t *want* to escape,” she said. “It’s incredibly risky. The Sky Raiders will come after me and punish me if they catch me. But my mother’s warning was as clear last night as the first, and it wouldn’t be there if this wasn’t something important. If I run off, I might avoid the danger, and the messenger should still be able to find me.”

“What if it’s just an important message? What if there’s no big threat?”

“Then I don’t need to run. But the message almost certainly means horrible trouble. Probably life or death. I can’t risk standing still. Durny stalled too long already trying to get permission to personally gather floatstones.”

Cole considered all she was telling him. He could think of only one reason she would reveal so much. “Are you asking me to run away with you?”

She stared at him. “I’ve already waited for too long. I need to leave. The only questions are when, and how, and whether you want to come with me.”

Cole buried his face in his hands. This was a lot to digest. He had wanted to escape ever since he came here. He needed to go find his friends. It would be great to have company—especially someone who knew a lot about the Outskirts. And Mira apparently knew how he could find the High King.

“If we get away, could you show me how to find my friends?” Cole asked.

“I could tell you the way to Junction City,” Mira said. “But you’d be crazy to try to take slaves from the High King on your own.” Mira lowered her voice. “I know people who want to see the High King fall. People who could help you find your friends. People who could give you a chance to succeed.”

“Really?” Cole asked, not daring to believe her.

“I want the High Shaper to lose his throne,” Mira whispered. “If we can get away, I’ll help you get the aid you need.”

Cole was so relieved that he wanted to hug her. This was better than he could have hoped! The thought that he might not have to rescue his friends alone and unguided lifted an oppressive weight from him.

But they hadn’t escaped yet. Mira had people after her, and they were both marked slaves. How far could they get without being discovered?

“How do you think we should do it?” Cole asked.

“You’ll come?” The hopeful relief in her voice helped cement his resolve.

“As long as we put together a decent plan.”

“You don’t have to let me drag you into this. The coming danger probably isn’t a threat to you unless you’re with me.”

“Good point. You’re on your own.”

She stared at him uncomfortably. “I understand.”

He grinned. “I’m joking. It’s just funny that you’re asking for help and trying to talk me out of it at the same time. Mira, I’d do anything to save my friends. If I can help you, too, that’s even better.”

“We can definitely help each other,” Mira said. “But even though I’ll try to help, don’t forget that getting involved with me could get you killed. The High Shaper hates me, and he hates the people I know who might help you. The secrets I know are dangerous to him. If you get mixed up with me, he’ll end up hating you, too.”

“I kind of hope he does,” Cole said. “He took my friends as slaves. I’m not a fan.”

Mira took a deep breath. “Okay. So we’re going to escape together.”

“The question is how.”

“That’s where it gets complicated. On foot, leaving at night would be reckless this close to the Brink, but we’ll get noticed quickly if we sneak away during the day. Whether we take off on foot, or even if we steal horses, they’ll be after us in no time. I don’t think we’d make it.”

“Can we steal a skycraft?”

“You need to wear an operator’s stone to steer one,” Mira said. “Otherwise it won’t respond. I know where Durny hid a few in case we needed a lifeboat in an emergency. But taking one will make the Sky Raiders doubly mad at us. They’ll know how we got away, and they’ll hunt us relentlessly.”

“What if you mess with the coffin?” Cole suggested. “Could you make it so you could steer it?”

“I could try.” Mira sighed. “I’m not sure I could pull it off. I haven’t done anything like that on my own before. I’m sure the other shapers have already taken the floatstones to use for a new lifeboat. Adam will want to replace the one we lost as quickly as possible.”

Cole folded his hands. “They’ll be plenty mad at us for leaving. If stealing a lifeboat helps our chances of getting away, I think we should risk making them even madder.”

Mira nodded. “That makes sense. It’s probably our only realistic option.”

“When were you thinking of going?”

She grimaced. “Soon. Probably early tomorrow morning, after they open up the landing bay but before any skycraft head out. They’re quick to seal the bay when the skycraft return at the end of the day.”

“They’ll chase us,” Cole said. “The skycraft can’t fly far over land, right?”

“A few hundred yards at best,” Mira said. “The floatstones only work in the sky beyond the Brink.”

“Tomorrow?”

After glancing cautiously at the door, Mira gave a serious nod. “Tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER

# 16

## MESSENGER

**A** stranger came through the front door while Cole was snacking in the common area. Twitch sat nearby, elbows on the table, gnawing at a large beef rib. Mira ate fruit on the other side of the room.

Cole had been watching everyone eat and talk with a strange sense of distance. This would be his last day here. In the morning he and Mira would make a run for it. No more meals prepared for him. No more Twitch or Jace or Adam or any of the other people. Also, no more salvaging missions where he risked death on a regular basis. And he'd finally get a real chance to find Dalton and Jenna. If he ended up back here, he and Mira would have failed, and who knew what punishments might await?

A pair of salvagers escorted the stranger. He wore dark jeans, dusty boots, and a gray leather jacket with black stripes down the sleeves. As the stranger considered the room, he showed relaxed interest rather than fear. He was of medium height, with his hair cropped short and stubble on his chin and cheeks. He might have been as young as thirty, but probably closer to forty.

Many had paused eating to watch as the stranger was escorted to where Adam sat on his jade throne. “Who is this?” Adam asked.

“He wants to see you,” said one of his escorts.

“I don’t know this guy,” Adam said. “You looking to join us?”

“No,” the man said.

“Buyers talk to Rowly or Hollis. Traders talk to Finch.”

“I need to speak with *you*,” the man said. He gave the room a sweeping glance. “In private.”

“Ha!” Adam shouted, slapping his hand on the arm of his throne. “We all hold shares of this business, friend, or we all will if we live long enough, so what you’d say to one, you can say to all.”

“How democratic,” the man said without approval. “Look, my news isn’t fit for all ears.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “What’s your name, stranger?”

“Joe MacFarland.”

“You from Zeropolis?”

“What gave it away?”

“Besides your clothes, your attitude, and the weapon tucked away near your left armpit? Joe, you’re far from home, so I’ll cut you a break. These people flirt with death on a regular basis. Your message won’t rattle anyone half as much as you think. Enough treading. Let’s have it.”

Joe sighed. “There’s a large detachment from the Junction Legion heading this way. They want to seize one of your slaves.”

Cole met eyes with Mira from across the room. They looked away from each other hurriedly. It didn’t have to be her, did it? But the High Shaper

lived in Junction, and her mother had sent a warning.

“Legionnaires?” Adam asked incredulously. “Nobody is going to waltz in here and dance away with one of my slaves. The High Shaper is one of my top customers.”

“The High Shaper wants this slave much more than he wants your trinkets,” Joe said. “We’re talking about four hundred trained soldiers.”

“Four hundred?” Adam blustered. “Do you know what it would take to send four hundred legionnaires from Junction to the Brink? Most of the land between us is empty!”

“I counted,” Joe said calmly. “The High Shaper isn’t playing games. They’d burn your operation to the ground to get what they want.”

“I’d like to see them try,” Adam said staunchly.

Several voices around the room lent support.

“Do nothing, and they’ll take what they came for,” Joe warned. “You can’t guess the value of this person. Let me smuggle the slave away from here. If they search the place and their quarry is gone, that should mark the end of your troubles.” Looking around, he hesitated. “Can’t we finish this in private?”

“Search our place?” Adam complained. “Listen, friend. Nobody crosses the High Shaper. He’s bad news to his enemies. I get that. But the Brink is the edge of the map, a long way from anywhere, and this operation has been running for hundreds of years. I don’t care how many men they have, we’re not going to let anyone push us around, especially not in our home. What sort of scam are you running? Smells like you’re the shyster after one of my slaves.”

“No con,” Joe said. “I’m not after handouts. I’ll pay you twice the fair value for the slave. You’ll be out nothing. But the legion will be here soon. If we’re to have a chance, we need to go.”

“Which slave are we discussing?” Adam asked. “Nearly all of us were slaves at some point. You here for me?”

Joe gave a rueful glance around the room. “That detail can only be shared in private. The information is dangerous to anyone who hears it.”

Adam folded his hands. “Then I fail to see why I should hurry to lend an ear.”

Joe sighed. “You’ll be dealing with the issue soon enough. The legion isn’t far behind me. Delay, and your options will shrink. You’ll end up betraying one of your own. Do you want the High Shaper to prove that he can take whatever he wishes from you? They’ll be diplomatic at first, but one way or another, they’ll claim their prize.”

“What slave?” one of the raiders asked.

“Out with it,” another demanded.

Hands on his hips, Joe shook his head and stared at the floor.

“Is this about Cole?” Adam guessed. “He’s our newest acquisition.”

All eyes turned to Cole, who shrank down in his seat. Joe followed their gazes to him and gave a little huff. “I’m not telling. I don’t want to be mysterious or difficult. It would just be safer for everyone if we settle this quietly.”

Adam put his boots up on a footstool. “You’re failing at mysterious, but you’re overskilled at difficult. We all know one another here, Joe. If someone vanishes, everybody in this room will realize who departed.”



“Not immediately,” Joe said. “And they won’t know why. We need all the time and secrecy we can get.”

Adam scowled. “Who would the High Shaper care about? Is it Durny? Our lead shaper? If so, you’re too late. He’s beyond all reach.”

“Not him,” Joe affirmed.

Cole avoided looking at Mira. He felt sick with worry. They had to be talking about her.

Adam raised his voice. “Any sign of legionnaires?”

“We’ve seen hints of a big group approaching,” a voice answered near the door. “Really big. Thought it might be a herd of buffalo. Could be riders. If so, it’s lots of them.”

“Hundreds of them,” Joe added.

Adam stood up. He was taller than Joe, with a thicker build. “I’m not sure whether you’re trying to solve our problem, cause it, or just profit by it.”

“I can make it all clear in private,” Joe insisted.

“I’ll tell the others, soon as we’re done.”

“I’m willing to take that chance.”

Adam considered him shrewdly.

“Incoming riders” came a shout from outside. “Three legionnaires.”

“We’re out of time,” Joe said urgently.

“Advance party,” Adam said. “Might be wise to hear both sides of this.”

“They’ll lie,” Joe said. “They’ll pressure you. Lend an ear, and you’ll end by handing over the slave.”

Pounding hoofbeats approached outside. Everyone turned their attention to the door.

“You skipped your chance to state your side,” Adam said.

Joe stepped close to Adam and whispered something. The men escorting Joe moved to intervene. Eyes widening, Adam lifted a hand to stop his men from interfering. Adam whispered something back. The stranger whispered something else.

“You want to hide?” Adam asked.

“Only if you give me the slave.”

Adam furrowed his brow.

The hoofbeats stopped near the door. Joe stepped away, taking a seat at a table. Adam returned to his throne. A man in a dark-blue uniform with gold trim came through the door, followed by two others, all three striding confidently. They each wore swords at their hips and held helmets under their arms.

“Captain Scott Pickett looking for Adam Jones,” the legionnaire in front announced. He had a small neatly trimmed mustache. His sweaty hair was plastered to his head from wearing the helmet.

“You found me, Pickett,” Adam said. “I don’t know your face. What brings you to the edge of the world?”

“An errand of small weight to you but of great import to our leaders,” Pickett said. “Might we confer in private?”

“We conduct our business publicly around here,” Adam said. “Most of those present share ownership in the operation.”

“As you will,” Pickett said efficiently. He seemed slightly unsettled, but he kept his gaze on Adam. “A slave was stolen some time ago from the High King. His Majesty would like her returned. We have traced her to this

location. At present, we do not hold you at fault in the matter—you would not have known she was stolen property.”

Cole refused to let himself look at Mira. She had told him she wasn't a slave before she left the High Shaper. The soldier must be lying to get what he wanted.

Shooting a quick glance at Joe, Adam shifted in his seat. “All the slaves here are bought and paid for.”

Pickett nodded briskly. “Understood. Considering the inconvenience, we will offer you five times her value.”

Adam whistled softly. “Slaves don't come cheap. If she's already the High Shaper's property, why offer so much?”

“She is dear to the High King, and he wants the matter resolved.”

“You have her papers?”

“The matter is . . . delicate,” Pickett hedged.

“Surely you have proof of ownership.”

“You have the word of the legion and of the High King.”

Adam rubbed his mouth. “If you can spare five times her value, surely you could offer ten.”

Pickett paused. “I expect that could be arranged.”

Cole squeezed the edge of the table where he sat. Was Adam going to bargain with him? If so, Mira needed to run for it immediately.

“I see,” Adam said. “And if ten, why not a hundred?”

“Now let's not—”

Adam held up a finger in protest. “The High Shaper has deep pockets, the matter is sensitive, and I'm a broker of rare valuables. Why not a thousand?”

Pickett straightened, his expression hardening. “Do not imagine you can abuse the legion, sir. The High King would prefer this to be handled with civility. He appreciates the value of your operation. But he will not hesitate to take what belongs to him. Commander Rainier is coming with a number of men.”

“Four hundred?”

“At least.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “Why send so many men for a single slave you can’t prove you own?”

“We’re not just here for the slave,” Pickett said. “We’re also on our way to deal with Carnag.”

“Carnag?” Adam repeated. “The High King is finally getting involved?”

Pickett ran a hand through his hair. “The reports about the monster are most disturbing. We’ve seen some oddities across the five kingdoms, but never anything quite like this. It’s emptying towns quicker than a plague. Local militia and small groups of legionnaires haven’t even been able to get reliable information.”

Frowning, Adam stared at Pickett. “Who is the slave?”

“She presently goes by Mira.”

Unlike the rest of the room, Cole didn’t swivel to stare at his friend. The revelation came as no shock. At least now he knew for sure.

Jace sprang to his feet. “Mira? What do you want with Mira?”

Pickett looked from Mira to Jace. “I want nothing. I’m under orders. None of you know this slave. Not really. She is here under false pretenses. The High King will have his property returned.”

In the distance, Cole heard the drumming of many hooves. Others in the room seemed to notice the rumble as well. All else was quiet for a moment as they listened.

Pickett cleared his throat into his gloved fist. "Please believe me that this business will conclude much more pleasantly if we resolve the matter before Commander Rainier arrives."

Cole risked a glance at Mira. Her eyes were wide. She looked panicked and uncertain. The situation was unraveling. They had to get away. What could he do?

"The girl has some shaping skills," Adam said. "It makes her natural value at least five times more than a talentless slave."

"Understood."

"And you'll give us ten times her value?"

"Fifty times the value of a common slave? I suspect that could be arranged."

"You suspect or you're sure? Are you empowered to negotiate or not?"

Pickett rubbed his mustache. "Very well. If it will settle the matter without a disturbance, done."

Cole got up and started toward the hall to the back door. If he skirted the walls, keeping away from the center of the room, he might be able to slip away unnoticed. Twitch looked at him questioningly, but Cole subtly waved away the attention. A few other men glanced his way, but most kept their eyes on the negotiation.

Adam rubbed his hands together. "That's a generous offer. Seems almost too good to be true. Deals seldom are. Makes me wonder what I'm missing."

“The High King wants the girl and would prefer to have the matter settled quietly,” Pickett replied. “Even so, you have my best offer. I won’t agree to more.”

Cole reached the hall to the back door. He turned his back to the negotiation and started down the corridor. Just a few more steps and he would pass out of view from the common area.

“Where do you think you’re going, boy?” Pickett asked sharply.

Cole froze. Trying to stay composed, he turned to find the legionnaire staring at him, along with everyone else in the room.

“I have to pee,” Cole apologized. “I was trying to hold it. When you have to, you have to.” Forcing a small smile, he crossed his legs.

Pickett waved a dismissive hand. “Fine. Be quick about it.”

Cole hurried down the hall and broke into a sprint once he knew he was out of sight. He raced out the back door and heard the thunder of approaching horses much more clearly. The legion wasn’t at their doorstep yet, but judging from the sound, it would only be a minute or two before the first soldiers arrived.

He found the bow and the shawl under the deck right where he had left them. Would he really shoot those soldiers? For Mira, if he had to, yeah, maybe. There might be a big army coming, but Cole doubted their horses could fly. Mira had to get aboard a skycraft.

Items in hand, Cole rushed through other halls to reach his room. If they were going to try to get away, he needed his gear. He strapped on the Jumping Sword as he exited and then settled the shawl over his shoulders. He

returned to the common room from the hall that led to the stairs to the skycraft hanger. The drumming of hooves was slowing down right outside.

On his feet now, Adam was shaking hands with Pickett. "You've purchased one very expensive slave," Adam said.

"You drive a hard bargain," Pickett replied.

Releasing his hand, Adam shrugged. "It's how we scrape by."

Nobody had noticed Cole return. Was he really going to do this? Adam had sold Mira. Any second, more soldiers would enter. Cole didn't want to see her get captured, and he couldn't lose his one link to finding his friends. It was now or never.

Heart pounding, Cole raised his bow and pulled the string back until an arrow appeared. Keeping the feathers near his cheek, he pointed the arrow at Pickett. Nobody was looking his way.

"Not so fast!" Cole yelled.

That got their attention.

Pickett and the two other legionnaires placed their hands on the hilts of their swords. Pickett glared at Adam. "What is this?"

Adam raised both hands. "Not my doing. That boy is a slave, not an owner. He'll wish he was never born after we disarm him. The girl is yours. If she runs, we'll help give chase. You've got too many comrades out there. I don't want the deal spoiled."

On the far side of the room, the front door opened, revealing a sea of legionnaires. Beyond the mob pressing toward the doorway, Cole could see others on horseback, some dismounting. The first couple of legionnaires stepped through.

“Now, Mira!” Cole called. “Time to go.”



## CHAPTER

# 17

## FLIGHT

**F**or a moment all was still. The legionnaires at the front door halted. Cole was undoubtedly the center of attention—some of it confused, much of it angry.

Then Mira lunged from her seat and the spell was broken.

Pickett and his two comrades drew their swords and rushed forward in a crouch, using the raiders at the tables as shields. The legionnaires at the door drew their weapons and burst in as well.

Joe sprang from his chair and tackled Pickett hard. Leaping up, Joe produced a silver tube and pointed it at one of the other legionnaires. When nothing happened, he slapped it, then pointed it again.

One of the legionnaires was moving quickly enough to cut off Mira's escape. Cole pivoted and prepared to release his arrow.

Before he let it fly, a golden lash snapped forward, coiling around the legionnaire's boots and jerking him into the air. The lash flung the soldier

brutally against a wooden support beam, and he folded with a loud grunt and crumpled to the floor. Jace held the other end of the golden rope.

Mira raced past Cole, who held his position, bow bent, covering her escape. Jace whipped a second legionnaire in the face with his golden lash, and diving over a table, Joe blindsided the stunned soldier.

“Don’t spoil this, men!” Adam bellowed. “After her!”

All around the room, raiders sprang to their feet. Many shuffled toward Cole. Another large group headed for the hall to the back door. Cole noticed Pickett slip into that hall, ahead of the mass of raiders.

Outrunning the other raiders, Jace and Twitch dashed by Cole. “Let’s get her out of here,” Jace gasped without slowing.

Sidestepping so he could face backward, Cole retreated, arrow nocked and ready. The oncoming raiders collided with one another as they crammed from the wide room into the bottleneck of the hallway. Some stumbled and fell, further clogging the passage. Jostling one another, they grimaced and elbowed and made slow progress. Eli was among the foremost. Giving Cole a meaningful look, he motioned for him to run.

Suddenly Cole got it. The raiders hadn’t turned into clumsy fools. They were deliberately blocking the hallways to give him a chance.

Turning, he sprinted down the hall until he reached the stairs to the caves. Bounding down recklessly, he followed the only underground route he knew well—the way to the landing bay. He could hear people running ahead of him—probably Jace and Twitch.

Why had the raiders decided to help them? Would they keep the halls plugged for long? He had no answers, but he knew that if Mira didn’t get in

the air quickly, she probably wouldn't get the chance. It was well into the afternoon. The salvaging parties had all returned. Would the landing bay be sealed? If so, could they open it?

While making his way toward the hangar, Cole heard footfalls behind him. Glancing back, he saw Mira. He slowed to let her catch up.

"Why are you behind me?" he asked.

"I had to swing by my room," she said breathlessly, reaching him and then passing him. "We need an operator's stone to fly a lifeboat." He saw that she had grabbed her Jumping Sword as well.

Cole ran hard. Keeping up with Mira was a challenge. Her full sprint was a little faster than his.

They burst through the entrance to the landing bay to find all the cliffside exits closed. The hangar was sealed up tight, the three big skycraft looming in the lamplight.

Jace was yelling at an older guy named Martin.

"Adam will have your head if you don't open it now!" Jace cried. "It's a Situation Spoiled. He said it twice."

"And if you're lying?" Martin replied.

"Then we'll be the ones in hot water!" Jace shouted.

"He's not lying," Twitch said.

"I have a stone," Mira called, drawing her Jumping Sword and leaping aboard the *Vulture*.

Keeping hold of one end, Jace threw his golden rope toward the *Vulture*. Uncoiling, it stretched out longer than Cole had seen it reach before, and the far end snaked around the mast. The rope then abruptly shortened, lifting

Jace off his feet and pulling him aboard. After he landed on the deck, the rope unraveled from the mast.

Cole didn't hear footsteps until just before Captain Pickett burst into the landing bay, sword in hand. Whirling, Cole pulled the arrow back and aimed low, at the legionnaire's legs. Less than ten feet separated Cole from the officer. As Cole released, Pickett dodged sideways, and the arrow streaked past him.

Pickett lunged forward and Cole skipped away, yanking the bowstring back until another arrow appeared. Pickett charged straight, Cole released the arrow, and it pierced the officer's thigh. Cole scurried aside as Pickett went to the ground with an anguished growl. Nobody came racing into the room behind him. For now, the legionnaire was alone.

Drawing his Jumping Sword, Cole pointed it at the deck of the *Vulture* and shouted, "Away!" As usual, the leap made his insides flutter. He held tightly to the sword as it hauled him up, over the railing, and onto the deck where he landed in a stumble. Twitch ran aboard the *Vulture* using the gangplank.

Mira and Jace were climbing into a lifeboat called the *Fair-Weather Friend*. Turning a wheel set against the wall, Martin began opening one of the smaller cliffside exits, not much bigger than a typical garage door. Late-afternoon daylight streamed into the hangar, outshining the lamps.

Cole hurried to the lifeboat. Jace sat in the rear by the tiller. A smooth, dark stone hung from a chain around his neck. He gave Cole a flat stare. "You coming?"

Twitch reached the lifeboat and jumped in as Cole hopped inside.

“You sure, Twitch?” Jace asked.

“I’m with you,” he responded.

“Hurry!” Pickett cried out. “They’re aboard the *Vulture!*”

Jace grabbed the tiller and tugged one of the levers. The lifeboat lurched forward, rocking Cole back. He clung desperately to the gunwale as the boat tilted enough to almost dump him over the side. After rearing up too steeply, the *Fair-Weather Friend* leveled out and dipped its nose toward the cliffside opening.

Legionnaires streamed into the room, swords drawn, some bearing bows. From his position on the floor, Pickett gestured manically at the fleeing lifeboat.

“Stop them!” Pickett cried. “Close the hatch!”

Several of the other legionnaires forcefully repeated the command as they raced toward the widening exit. Cole slouched down as arrows hissed into the air, some striking the stern of the lifeboat near Jace.

“You out of arrows?” Jace asked Cole, the skycraft wobbling as he tried to crouch and steer at the same time.

Cole wasn’t anxious to raise his head, but some shots at the legionnaires would force them to take cover and slow their attack. He sat up, pulled back his bowstring, and sent an arrow toward the soldiers, then repeated the action again and again, a new arrow appearing every time. Keeping low, Cole took little aim, focusing instead on speed and on not getting shot. An arrow whistled past, almost close enough to scratch him, and he ducked down again. More arrows thumped against the hull.

“Hold your fire!” Pickett called, his voice strained. “You might hit the girl. Block their escape!”

To Cole’s horror, he saw Martin slumped against the wall, pierced by three arrows. Mouth open, head lolling, the raider looked up at them blankly, one of his hands twitching. The lifeboat had almost reached the exit! The hatch hadn’t been raised very much, and many legionnaires were charging their way. It would be close.

“Heads down,” Jace ordered as the lifeboat rasped through the gap, the keel scraping the landing bay door.

After ducking, Cole looked back to see legionnaires appear in the cliffside opening. As the *Fair-Weather Friend* climbed away from the landing bay at full speed, Cole released arrow after arrow back at the opening, forcing the soldiers to stand aside. They got off a few arrows, but none hit the lifeboat.

“We’re leveling off?” Cole asked.

“If we climb too fast, the cavalry will use us for target practice,” Jace replied. “We’ll go higher once we’re farther from the Brink.”

“Of course today has to be clear,” Twitch grumbled.

Cole looked around. The sun was dropping toward the dark mass of the Western Cloudwall. The only normal clouds were high and wispy. The castles were few and distant. “Not many places to hide.”

“How long before they come after us?” Mira asked.

“They’ll demand skycraft,” Jace said. “Adam is in no position to deny them. He’ll stall a little, but not for long. Situation Spoiled doesn’t call for direct resistance.”

“They’ll also track us from the cliff top,” Twitch said. “Even at top speed, a lifeboat can’t outpace a horse.”

“Maybe not at full gallop,” Jace said, “but a horse can’t gallop forever.”

“The legion has good horses,” Twitch said. “They can probably gallop long enough to keep us from landing on the Brink before they have the skycraft after us. Even if we get ahead of them, on a day like today they’ll see where we return to the cliff and track us down.”

“If we’re doomed, why’d you come?” Jace snapped in frustration.

Twitch gave a little shrug. “I’m done with Skyport. We risk our lives on every mission. This seemed dangerous, but I’ll take one big risk over all the missions I have left. If we can stay free until nightfall, we might slip away into the darkness.”

The lifeboat was climbing again. Skyport shrank behind them, the horses and the legionnaires becoming an army of ants. With the fresh breeze in his face and the warm sun about to set, Cole could almost forget they were still in danger.

“What are our assets?” Jace asked. “I have my rope. Mira and Cole have their Jumping Swords. Where’d you score the bow, Cole?”

“On our last mission,” Cole said. “I stashed it away in case I needed it.”

Jace whistled. “That could have gotten you in deep trouble. I won’t complain, though. How long until it runs out of arrows?”

“Supposedly, never.”

“That’ll be useful if they get close,” Jace said. “You have rotten aim, but you can make up for it with volume. By the way, when a guy is coming for you, don’t shoot at his legs. If it’s worth shooting him, it’s worth shooting

him dead. Aim for the middle of his chest. Trying to wing an enemy will get you killed.”

“I didn’t want to kill the guy just for doing his job,” Cole said, a little embarrassed by the reprimand.

“His job was to kill you,” Jace said. “They obviously want Mira alive, but they’d take out the rest of us without losing any sleep.”

“He’s right, Cole,” Twitch said. “The legion plays for keeps.”

“How about you, Twitch?” Jace asked. “What do you have that might help us?”

“Nice try,” Twitch said.

“It’s not a game anymore,” Jace insisted. “Tell us.”

“It was never a game,” Twitch replied, wringing his fingers. “I kept my special item secret before, and I’ll keep it secret now. Knowing what it is won’t affect our plans. You’ll find out if I have to use it.”

“Can it camouflage us?” Jace asked. “Make us invisible? Knock a skycraft out of the air?”

“If I could do something like that, I’d tell you. My secret won’t affect our strategy.”

“What *is* our strategy?” Mira asked. “Try to evade them until it gets dark? Hope for a moonless night?”

“The landing bay is opening up,” Cole said, eyes on the cliff. “All three of the big entrances.”

Jace nodded. “We’ll head as far away from the Brink as we can. A lifeboat is a bit faster than the big skycraft. We’ll veer toward the Eastern Cloudwall.



It's almost twice as far from us as the Western Cloudwall, so we'll have more room to maneuver. Plus, there are more castles that way."

"How many do you count east of us?" Twitch asked.

"Five," Jace replied.

"Six," Twitch said, pointing. "You probably missed that little one down low."

Jace leaned eastward and squinted. "You're right, I missed that one. Not that it matters. It's almost to the cloudwall. We couldn't get there before it vanishes."

"Do you think we could hide out at one of the castles?" Cole asked.

"Might be worth a try as a last resort," Mira said. "The problem is that any castle safe enough to hide us will probably be easy to attack. We could end up cornered."

"If they have a bunch of skycraft, they might corner us in the air," Cole said. "Maybe one of the castles has defenses, like the catapults at Parona."

"It might be worth checking out," Jace said. "But only because we have so few options."

"This won't be easy," Mira said. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't make us come," Jace said.

"Why'd you stick your neck out for me?" Mira asked.

Jace shrugged, looking away from her. "They had no proof you belonged to them. It made me mad to think of them taking you away."

Cole wondered if Mira really didn't get how much Jace liked her. She seemed oblivious.

“It made you mad, so you attacked legionnaires and ran away with us?” Mira asked.

“I have a bad temper,” Jace mumbled.

“Did you really used to belong to the High Shaper?” Twitch asked.

“Who are you to probe at secrets?” Mira complained.

Blinking rapidly, Twitch gave a nervous chuckle. “I’m one of the guys who ran away with you and might get killed for it. I’m just wondering if their claim is legit.”

“The High Shaper knows me,” Mira said. “I was never his slave. I shouldn’t say more. It could put you in even greater danger.”

“Here come the skycraft,” Cole said, watching as the *Vulture*, the *Borrower*, and the even the damaged *Domingo* glided out of the landing bay openings and away from the cliff.

“We’re in hot water already,” Jace said. “We’ll probably end up captured, falling, or dead. What’s the Big Shaper’s attachment to you?”

“It’s complicated,” Mira said. “I’m not really a slave. The mark is real, but it’s a cover. Durny was helping me hide. Is that enough?”

“I guess, if it’s all you want to spill,” Jace said. “Did you know that guy from Zeropolis? Joe?”

“I’ve never seen him before,” Mira said, glancing at Cole. “I think he knows who I am.”

“I hope so.” Jace chuckled. “He probably got himself killed for you.” He paused. “The High Shaper sent four hundred legionnaires to track you down. That’s the craziest part. Why would he do that for anyone?”

“It was for Carnag, too,” Mira reminded him.

“Right, but the Brink is a good distance out of the way,” Jace said. “They could have sent a smaller group. But all four hundred came. Why?”

“Good question,” Twitch murmured, biting his thumbnail.

Mira looked at them. “The visit from the legion means I’m in serious trouble. The less you get involved, the better. My secret isn’t fun. It would make you targets for the rest of your lives.”

“We’ll probably get killed, anyway,” Jace said. “It would be nice to know why.”

Mira sighed. “Okay. Here’s the short version. The High Shaper is a monster. I know some things about the death of his five daughters. He planned it. He got away with murder. I even have proof. He would do anything to keep that secret.”

“You’re serious,” Jace said, astonished.

She nodded. “Four-hundred-legionnaires serious.”

Everyone kept silent for a long moment.

“The skycraft are spreading out,” Twitch reported. “They’ve deployed all the lifeboats. While heading this way, they’re also cutting off any retreat to the Brink.”

“Can we just keep flying away from the Brink?” Cole asked. “It looks like it goes forever.”

“It might,” Jace said darkly. “We can’t. If we get far enough from the Brink, the sky won’t hold us anymore. The same thing happens if we go too high, too low, or inland. It doesn’t change all at once. We’ll feel the boat start to slip when we get too far out, beyond where any of the castles go, near where the cloudwalls end.”

“The cloudwalls end?” Cole exclaimed. “Can we go around them?”

“The skycraft won’t work that far out,” Twitch said. “There’s no way over, under, or around them.”

Cole frowned. “We’re boxed in.”

“Pretty much,” Jace agreed.

“Think we can dodge them until dark?” Cole wondered.

Jace stared at the oncoming skycraft. “We’re about to find out.”

## CHAPTER

# 18

## CLOUDWALL

**A**s the sun sank into the Western Cloudwall, Jace tried to keep the *Fair-Weather Friend* away from the oncoming swarm of skycraft, which included the three large vessels, along with seven lifeboats. The plan to escape the legion by skycraft looked worse and worse as the persistent armada cut off any attempt to double back, herding them away from the Brink and toward the dead end of the Eastern Cloudwall.

From what Cole could see, the skycraft mostly contained uniformed legionnaires, with raiders at the controls and also manning some of the weapons on the larger vessels. The pursuing skycraft moved with ruthless coordination, climbing when they rose, dropping when they dived, crowding them toward a corner with no escape.

Cole and the others had checked the castles they could reach ahead of the other skycraft. One had been crafted out of black metal and looked like a certain death trap. Another had crumbled to ruins, offering scant cover. A third was made of crystal, again leaving nowhere to hide. With the skycraft

hounding them relentlessly, there was no time to plan. They could only flee and pray for darkness.

The *Fair-Weather Friend* swerved farther away from the Brink and began to shudder. It dropped jerkily, leaning hard to the right. Jace curved the little craft back toward the distant Brink. “If we go any farther out, we’ll fall.”

Cole looked back at where the sun had disappeared behind the Western Cloudwall. That side of the sky remained bright red and orange. It would still be close to an hour before the true darkness of night. He glanced at the other skycraft drawing nearer, leaving no room for evasion.

“They’ve got us,” Cole said. “We don’t have enough room to run until it gets dark. We have to try to break through them.”

Jace shook his head. “If we charge between them, they’ll just close in from all sides. We’ll get swarmed. They have grappling hooks and plenty of weapons. We don’t stand a chance of getting past them.”

“He’s right,” Twitch said, licking his lips. “Avoiding risk is my specialty. Charging through them won’t work.”

The Eastern Cloudwall loomed closer than ever. Impenetrably dark and unnaturally flat, the cloudbank stretched high and low, left and right. Cole squeezed his bow. None of the other skycraft were close enough to hit with an arrow yet, but the nearest weren’t out of range by much. “We’ve got maybe ten more minutes of running room.”

“Twitch,” Jace said. “What else can we try?”

“They want Mira,” Twitch said, tapping his fingers rapidly against his knee. “Maybe we can bluff. If we threaten to fly into the cloudwall, they might back off.”

“Try to stall them until it gets dark?” Mira asked.

“It’s worth a shot,” Jace said. “Unless anybody has another idea.”

Cole could see no other solution. If they tried to fly through their pursuers, they wouldn’t succeed. If they tried to fight, it would be even worse. The only option was to keep flying toward the cloudwall.

“What if they call our bluff?” Cole worried.

Jace frowned. “We’ll have no escape. If they ignore the bluff, and we don’t fly into the cloudwall, they’ll swoop in and take us in seconds.”

“It’s a pretty weak option if we’re not willing to follow through,” Twitch said.

“If we fly into the cloudwall, we’ll be killed,” Cole said. “At least if they capture us, we’ll have a chance to live.”

“I might live,” Mira said. “For a while. As a prisoner. They’ll want to question me—try to confirm what I know and who I’ve told. You guys are runaway slaves. Jace hurt some soldiers. Cole shot an officer. You all helped me. They know I could have shared my secret. They’ll execute you.”

“We don’t *know* that going into the cloudwall will kill us,” Twitch said slowly. “We just know that nobody has returned.”

“Now you’re talking crazy,” Jace said.

“Am I?” Twitch replied, tapping his knuckles together. “They won’t follow us in there. We could just go in a little, barely out of sight. My instincts feel better about that than letting them have us.”

“We bluff first, though,” Cole clarified.

“Of course,” Mira said. “But if they keep coming anyway, we take cover in the cloudwall. And if we can’t get back out, we try to survive it.”

Jace chuckled bitterly. “If you’re going to die, you might as well be doing something really, really stupid.”

Cole peered over the side of the lifeboat at the infinite drop. None of them had parachutes—there hadn’t been time to grab them. He gazed ahead at the imposing cloud-wall. What dangers was it hiding? Would it grind them to atoms? Did it house deadly monsters? Or was there some other explanation for why people never returned? Could it be a one-way portal to some other place?

As the cloudwall drew near, the other skycraft closed in. Cole kept his bow ready. The *Vulture* was probably within range now, as were two of the lifeboats. But many of the legionnaires had bows. If everyone started shooting, Cole doubted whether he and his friends would survive.

Mira stood up. “Back away from us!” she shouted. “Leave us alone or we’ll enter the cloudwall!”

A man on the *Vulture* raised his voice to answer. He had gray hair and a prominent nose. “We would rather take you alive, child, but we can’t help it if you destroy yourself. Do what you must.”

“Take us in,” Mira muttered. “Hurry.”

“You sure?” Jace whispered back. “Even if they kill the rest of us, you might still live.”

“I’m not so sure,” Mira said. “I’ll take my chances with the cloudwall. Don’t let them get too close. Go for it.”

Fingers tight on his bow, Cole glanced over at the cloudwall. It was less than a minute away. The closer they got to the foggy barrier, the clearer it became that the wall wasn’t perfectly flat—some indistinct mistiness on the



surface caught the glow of the sunset. Did that mean there might be a hazy space before the true cloudwall began, a place where they could hide?

“Don’t be fools!” the man from the *Vulture* cried. “You don’t want to suffer a horrible death in that darkness. Mira, if you come to me, I will spare the three slaves who aided you.”

“I don’t believe you,” Mira yelled back.

“I am Commander Rainier, highest-ranked officer of the legion,” the man replied loudly. “It is well within my power to make this deal. I swear by my office and by my good name, before all witnesses present, that your three companions will be returned to their master unharmed if you end this folly and turn yourself in.”

Arms hugging her chest, Mira glanced down at the others.

“Don’t give in for me,” Jace said, still guiding the lifeboat at full speed toward the cloudwall.

“Me either,” Cole said, unsure whether he fully meant it.

“Up to you,” Twitch said.

Mira scrunched her eyebrows and stared down. “I’m willing to chance it, but it’s not fair to force you three into this.”

“He’s pulling your strings,” Jace said. “Don’t let him use us against you. If you give up because of me, I swear I’ll jump. Plus, he could be lying. Who knows? Maybe we’ll survive the cloudwall. Forget about us. Do what you want to do.”

“No thanks!” Mira called.

“Stop them!” Commander Rainier roared. “Stop them at all costs!”

Grappling hooks came flying through the air, three from the *Vulture*, one from a lifeboat. One grapnel missed. Jace kicked another that would have landed in the stern, knocking it away. Two fell inside the lifeboat and pulled tight against the side, instantly slowing them and causing them to turn.

Dropping his bow and drawing his Jumping Sword, Cole severed one of the lines attached to the grapnel. Mira cut the other one.

All the vessels converged at top speed. More grappling hooks came flying. Cole batted one out of the air with his sword. Twitch nimbly caught another and tossed it aside. A few fell short. When one caught hold of the lifeboat again, Mira promptly slashed the line.

“Fools!” Commander Rainier shouted.

Glancing over his shoulder, Cole saw the murky surface of the cloudwall perhaps five seconds away. Was this how he would die? Would it hurt? Would he even know he had been killed? He had to hope that they could duck out of sight and lurk at the edge of the cloudbank until nightfall.

Cole looked back at the *Vulture*, where Commander Rainier had a hand extended toward them, face distorted with panic and anger. He realized that with his Jumping Sword, the *Vulture* was comfortably within range. What if he took his chances with the legionnaires? No, that wouldn't end well. Having lost Mira, they would make an example of him.

Mira and Twitch pulled Cole down. Only then did he realize that the others were no longer standing. They were bracing themselves. Sheathing his sword, he followed their example.

“Hold on!” Jace yelled. “Here we go!”

The prow of the *Fair-Weather Friend* nosed into the mist. Everything became hazy. Cole could hardly see Mira beside him. A moment later, damp darkness completely enveloped them. Looking back, Cole could no longer see outside the cloudwall. He couldn't even see his own hands.

"Turn!" Twitch urged in the darkness. "Slow down! We mustn't go in too far."

"I'm trying," Jace replied, voice strained. "It won't respond."

Their speed was increasing. Damp air whistled by them. The lifeboat lurched and shuddered.

"Hang on!" Mira said.

Gripping the side of the lifeboat, Cole stayed low and wedged himself into the most secure position he could manage. The wind became a moist gale, roaring in his ears. The lifeboat rattled, jerked, and jolted. He was on a nightmare bobsled ride without a track or a finish line.

What if he fell? Would he tumble through damp darkness until he starved? Would his fate be any different if he held on?

The lifeboat whooshed onward. It didn't feel like they were turning much. Cole only saw black. His clothes and hair became soaked by the mist. He thought he heard Jace shouting, but the words were lost in the gale. The *Fair-Weather Friend* quaked and groaned.

And then the cloudy darkness lifted, though the lifeboat did not slow down.

Eyes squinted against the damp wind, Cole glimpsed a distant castle in the twilight, surrounded by wide grounds with walls and fences, fountains and statues, lawns and trees.

His eyes registered the encouraging sight in a flash before the nose of the lifeboat dipped down toward a swirling funnel that yawned larger than a football stadium. It was like beholding the inside of a tornado—the howling suction whirled down, down, down into infinite darkness. Wispy streams of vapor from the rear of the cloudwall flowed into the chaotic funnel, along with the *Fair-Weather Friend*.

Jace was on his feet, wrenching at the controls. “It won’t budge!” he yelled in frustration, face flushed with effort.

Rocketing faster than ever, the lifeboat reached the rim of the funnel and began circling down into the enormous mouth. Looking around frantically, Cole saw no escape. They were already too low to view the castle. With each revolution, the lifeboat sank deeper into the funnel. Despite the immense size of their circular path, they streaked fast enough to feel the mighty g-forces of the constant turn.

Mira yelled something, and Jace shouted something else, all words lost in the cacophony of swirling air and water. Other objects descended with them, hugging the blurred walls of the endless vortex—a damaged wagon, an embroidered carpet, a stuffed tiger, an irregular jumble of timbers, a copper birdbath. Some of the debris seemed to hold steady or even rise, but the lifeboat was definitely in a downward spiral.

With no warning, the *Fair-Weather Friend* rammed into a huge church bell, which crumpled the prow and produced a mellow *gong*. The impact sent Jace over the side of the lifeboat, tumbling into the gloomy throat of the funnel.

Twitch immediately leaped from the boat, wings appearing on his back. He dove after Jace, reaching him just before he joined the frenetic wall of the vortex. Wings fluttering, gradually losing altitude, Twitch toted Jace toward the center of the funnel. The lifeboat rapidly left the two boys behind as it continued with the wild swirl of the maelstrom.

“Did you see that?” Cole yelled to Mira.

She either didn’t hear him or couldn’t understand. She was shouting something and pointing at the bottom of the boat. Cole followed her finger to where a split in the hull was trembling and widening.

“Oh no,” he managed before the *Fair-Weather Friend* split down the middle, the two halves flying apart. For a moment he glided through the air, his bow hovering in front of him. He snatched it an instant before plunging into the seething motion of the vortex’s wall.

All breath was ripped from him. When he tried to inhale, vapor blasted into his nostrils, making him cough and choke. He flipped end over end, like a surfer who had wiped out on a tsunami. The tumult was deafening, the wind and water blinding. No motion he made mattered—he was at the complete mercy of the vast whirlwind.

Clamping a hand over his nose and mouth, Cole managed to filter the tumultuous air enough to gasp quick breaths. He had no sense of where he was in relation to the others or to anything else. All he knew was that he was moving very fast. If he collided with a church bell or part of the lifeboat, that would be the end.

He became entangled in the mesh of a net. It was all around him and constricted abruptly. Upon tightening, the net pulled him away from the wall

of the whirlwind, out into the central void.

Swinging like a pendulum, Cole stared in confusion down the turbulent vortex at the fathomless well of darkness below. The noise was tremendous, a banshee choir that made his chest throb and his head vibrate. This was no mere tornado, no simple whirlpool, no common hurricane. This was the cosmic drain that would suck all reality into everlasting nothingness.

Looking up, Cole found that his net dangled from an insectile flying machine. Somewhat like a honeybee, and somewhat like a beetle, the wings of the machine moved in a barely discernable blur. Although crafted out of silvery metal, a mosaic of snail shells, colored glass, and macaroni decorated much of its surface.

Craning his neck as the net continued to rock, Cole found that three other flying machines had collected Mira, Jace, and Twitch, each in their own nets. Empty nets hung from an extra pair of flying machines. The machines weren't much larger than a person. Cole saw no sign of anyone piloting or otherwise controlling them. Except for the wings, the machines didn't seem particularly lifelike. The eyes were brass rings.

After gathering in the middle of the vortex, the flying machines rose together. Cole's companions looked uncomfortable in their nets—Mira lay curled on her back, Twitch was folded on his side, and Jace was struggling to flip himself right-side up.

Cole realized that he was partly upside down himself, with a lot of his weight on his left shoulder and side. Clawing at the net, he tried to right himself. His efforts made him sway, but yielded little result because the net was too confining for much movement.

Though awkwardly positioned, the others seemed glad to see one another. They had to be surprised to be alive. Cole sure was. That tumble into the whirlwind had felt like the end. He tried to ask what was going on, and they shouted things as well, but nothing could be heard over the ferocious howl of the vortex.

The flying machines gradually levitated above the mouth of the maelstrom. They rose straight for some time before moving away from the cloudwall. Above them, stars appeared in the fading twilight. Beyond the frenzied mouth of the whirlwind, the castle reappeared, several of the windows lit, but many more of them dark.

Who lived in the castle? Was it the people who controlled the flying machines? Whoever they were, they couldn't be worse than death by vortex, could they?

The flying machines moved toward the castle, flying lower as the spacious grounds approached. The landscape reminded Cole of the Brink—cloud and downward glimpses of sky until the ground suddenly began.

As the tumult of the whirlwind receded, Cole called out to Mira again. "Where are we?"

She met his eyes uncertainly. "We're off the map. This shouldn't be here." Even though she was yelling, he could barely hear her.

Jace gestured for them to look ahead.

On a wide lawn below waited a human figure surrounded by a group of crude, thick-limbed giants. As they drew nearer, it became clear that the figure was a woman and the giants were made of sharp, eroded stone, the sort

found by the seaside. The giants formed an orderly ring, and the flying machines hovered into the center of the circle.

In unison, the flying machines dropped their nets. Cole fell a few feet, landing awkwardly on his side on the close-trimmed grass. He started scrabbling with the net, trying to find a way out.

“Keep still,” the woman demanded in a hard voice. She walked closer, hands behind her waist. Her hair was tied back tightly, her features harsh, with dramatic eyebrows and a defined jawline. Sleek black boots rose almost to her knees, and a long, slender sword hung at her side. “This is a private estate. Outsiders are not welcome. Your lives depend on the answers to two questions: Who are you, and what are you doing here?”



## CHAPTER

# 19

## ASIA AND LIAM

**C**ole stared up at the woman through the netting. How should he answer? He hesitated, as did the others. She stopped right in front of him, glaring down.

“Don’t lie,” she said humorlessly. “I’ll know. Spit it out.”

“I’m Cole,” he said. “I’m not from here. The Outskirts, I mean. I came here to help my friends who got kidnapped, but I was taken as a slave and sold to the Sky Raiders. I was escaping from them with some friends.”

“You,” she said, approaching Twitch, “are not as you appear.”

Cole noticed that his wings were gone. Had that been his special item? Wings?

“I’m not,” Twitch said. “I’m from Elloweer. I was taken as a slave as well.”

“How did you revert to your true form?” she pressed.

“I have a ring,” he said.

“And you?” she asked Jace.

“Why do you care?” Jace replied.

“You’re all trespassers,” she barked. “I handle any intruders.”

“You have a name?” Jace asked.

“I have three—Judge, Jury, and Executioner. Answer me or perish. Who are you? Why did you come here?”

Jace gave a reluctant sigh. “I’ve been a slave since I can remember. I never knew my parents. I was sold to the Sky Raiders because my owners hated me. I was escaping with these guys.”

“Escaping into the cloudwall? Do you know nothing?”

“We were cornered,” Jace said.

She gave a single nod and walked to Mira. “And you?”

“You can probably guess by now,” Mira said.

“I cannot,” the woman said. “You are not as you appear. There is a potent shaping bound to you. Something I can’t readily identify. And I sense a degree of power in you as well.”

“Are you a shaper?”

A slight sneer curled her lip. “You’ve never met my equal.”

“I do a little shaping,” Mira said. “Maybe that’s what you’re sensing.”

“Evade my questions at your peril,” the woman said, snapping her fingers.

One of the stony giants stomped forward and raised a misshapen fist above Mira. The big rocky limb was large enough to flatten half of her with one blow.

Jace’s golden rope flashed out from his net, coiling around the woman’s throat. “Call it off,” he growled.

A young man swooshed into view, standing on a silver disk the size of a manhole cover. Not older than twenty, he had boyish features and

mischievous eyes. He wore a fuzzy brown jacket and alligator-skin boots, and he held what looked like silver salt shakers in each hand. Knees slightly bent, he hovered perhaps ten feet off the ground, although the disk had no visible means of propulsion.

“That’s enough,” the young man said in a friendly tone. Pointing at the rope, it unraveled from the woman’s throat and fell limply to the grass. Chopping a hand toward the stone giant, it turned to cardboard and staggered back a few paces.

Glowering, the woman turned to the newcomer. “This is none of your affair.”

“I did make the fliers,” the young man corrected. “And I overheard the conversation.”

Jace kept flicking his wrist, but his golden rope didn’t respond any differently than an ordinary rope would. “What did you do to it?”

“I cut it off from you,” the young man said offhandedly. “Don’t worry. If we like you, I can set things right. It’s a pretty cool rendering. You got it from a sky castle?”

“You’re ruining the interrogation,” the woman seethed.

“Be honest, Asia,” the young man said. “The interrogation was getting messy.”

“I was about to sever the rope—”

“Which would have wrecked it,” the young man inserted.

“I had the situation under—”

“Asia, a simple thank you would—”

“What have I told you about using my name in front of outsiders?”

“Maybe it was your *codename*,” he said with a wink.

Cole tried to stifle a laugh.

The young man on the disk glanced his way. “They can’t be all bad. This one even has a sense of humor—and that’s while lying in a net after nearly getting drawn into a terminal void.”

The muscles in her jaw clenching, Asia took a controlled breath. “Let me do my job.”

“What about our new captain of the guard?” he asked.

“I sent him to fetch reinforcements,” Asia said. “He’s all right for monitoring semblances, but these are our first living intruders in ages.”

The young man waved a hand at them. “They’re escaped slaves. It fits. It rings true.”

“We have to verify—”

“They’re obviously not the vanguard of a conquering army.”

“They could be spies.”

The young man paused. “True.”

“We have hundreds of legionnaires coming this way,” Asia said.

He cocked his head thoughtfully. “Also true.”

“We can’t risk exposure.”

The young man faced them. “I’m Liam. Are any of you spies? Answer out loud.”

“No,” Cole said.

The others said the same, their answers overlapping.

“What about you?” Liam casually asked Mira. “You really are linked to a very unusual shaping. What’s the story?”

“What is this?” Cole asked. “Good cop, bad cop?”

“What?” the young man exclaimed, leaning back and covering his eyes. “You know about good cop, bad cop! Who told you? Asia, he knows!”

Asia faced the young man imploringly. “Would you please just let me—”

“Pound them into the lawn?” the young man interrupted. He stopped, as if considering. “They might make decent fertilizer . . . but no, I think we’ve heard enough. We’ll let You Know Who be the final judge.”

“You want to bring possible spies before You Know Who?”

“If they’re spies, then we’ll turn them into fertilizer. No, better—we’ll make wishes and chuck them into the terminal void.”

“And if her peculiar shaping is letting the girl communicate beyond the cloudwall?” Asia pressed.

“Have you sensed transmissions from any of them?”

“The shaping has strange connections beyond her,” Asia said.

“Right, but no communication,” he said. “They’re not spies. If they are, he’ll figure it out, and we’ll punish them. I’ll take the blame.”

Asia sighed in defeat. “Why do I put up with you?”

“Because it isn’t your choice,” he said.

“You’ve got that right,” she huffed.

Liam faced Cole and his friends. “If you’ll hand over any weapons, renderings, or enhanced objects, I’ll untangle you from those nets.”

“What if we refuse?” Jace asked.

“Don’t worry,” Liam said. “If he likes you, you’ll get it all back. I don’t even want any of your . . . Well, I kind of want the rope, but I’ll get over it. Come on, let’s have the stuff. It’s getting late.”

He was right. Only the last traces of twilight remained in the sky above. Many stars were out now.

Cole was having trouble unsheathing his Jumping Sword. “This is sort of hard with the nets.”

“Valid point,” Liam agreed. “Promise you’ll be cool about it? Without the nets, if you try something, we’ll have to sick the grunts on you.” He pointed to the cardboard giant, and it turned back to wave-worn stone.

“We’ll behave,” Cole said.

“What about you, rope boy?” Liam asked.

“If you don’t mess with us, I won’t mess with you,” Jace pledged.

“I guess that’s fair. Promise? Double-dog promise?”

“I think that’s ‘double-dog *dare you*,’” Cole put in.

Liam looked at him in surprise. “You’re right. What’s a really strong promise?”

“Cross your heart and hope to die,” Cole said.

“Oh, I like that,” Liam replied. Looking at Asia, he jerked his head toward Cole. “This one could be useful.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Do you all swear to be good?” Liam asked. “Cross your hearts and hope to die? I need verbal confirmation.”

They all agreed.

Liam waved a hand, and the nets blew free of them, becoming gaseous and quickly dispersing in the air.

“You’re good,” Mira said.

Liam shrugged. “I’m not completely useless. Let’s have those items.”

Cole handed over his shawl, his bow, and his sword to Liam.

Twitch hesitated with his ring. "This means a lot to me."

"I'll take good care of it," Liam assured him. "I wouldn't even have a use for it. I'm not from Elloweer."

Twitch handed it over. Jace gave up his inert rope. Mira surrendered her Jumping Sword.

Liam returned to Cole. "You still have something small."

"I forgot," Cole said, taking the jewel he had gotten in Parona from his pocket.

Liam held it up and scrutinized it. "Never mind. It's not worth the trouble to keep it with me." He handed it back. "You hold on to it. Or don't. Either way, you won't lose it."

"Here he comes," Asia said.

Cole looked beyond her to where a large warrior led a group of others in full armor across the lawn. Even though it was dim, Cole recognized the leader. "Lyrus?"

The big warrior increased his pace to a jog. "Cole? Is that you?"

Liam looked befuddled. "You two know each other?"

"We've met," Cole said.

Lyrus hustled forward and gave Cole a small bow. "I am astonished. How did you come here?"

"Through the cloudwall," Cole said.

"You know them?" Asia asked. "Are they Sky Raiders?"

"Salvagers, yes," Lyrus said. "And Cole is a proven hero."

"Anything suspicious about them?" Asia inquired.

Lyrus shook his head. "I have only met Cole and Mira, but I believe they have good characters. Cole helped me awaken to my true nature."

"Why aren't you dead?" Cole asked.

"I was resigned to my demise," Lyrus said. "But I was rescued. They fully healed my injuries."

"Lots of semblances slide into the terminal void," Liam said. "We can lend a hand to only a small fraction of them. Our master sensed that Lyrus was unusually self-aware. We rescued him and decided he would be a good fit as captain of the guard."

"Can we please take this reunion to the castle?" Asia begged.

Liam touched his forehead and gave a quick bow. "As you wish. Follow me!" Tilting on his disk, he took off at a speed none of them could possibly match. His flying insects buzzed after him, rapidly falling behind.

"Stay with me," Asia grumbled. "Judgment has yet to be passed on you. We're off to meet the master."



## CHAPTER

## 20

# DECLAN

**T**he castle swept up from the ground, its unusual architecture dominated by concave curves. Smooth walls sloped inward before flaring outward as they rose. The towers tapered, then widened toward the top. The subtle hourglass theme was echoed on the battlements and in the windows.

Cole spent most of the long walk in silence. Lyrus had been reluctant to converse, explaining that, technically, Cole was a prisoner until the master decided otherwise. Whenever Cole spoke to his friends, Asia stayed nearby, obviously listening.

Left to his thoughts, Cole wondered about the identity of the person whom Asia, Liam, and Lyrus served. If the master were an enemy of the legion, hopefully he or she would be on their side. But not necessarily. The master could simply be a recluse who hated all trespassers. Obviously, the master wanted to stay hidden. Otherwise why live behind the cloudwall with lots of guards and a giant whirlwind to vacuum away any visitors?

The castle grounds had little light, and though the stars were bright, no moon was in view, making it hard to discern the hedges, lawns, trees, and fountains, except as vague forms in the dimness. The castle was easier to observe, thanks to lights in the windows and fires on the walls.

Full night had fallen by the time they reached the huge gates. As they neared the sloping walls, the gates swung open and a portcullis cranked upward. The group passed into a large courtyard lit by elaborate fountains of water and flame. Wavering shadows and splashes of light danced on the soaring walls. Heavily armed figures clanked around the area, armor glinting in the firelight.

As Asia led them toward the main castle doors, they opened and a figure emerged, head wreathed by curly brown hair, his body husky but not flabby. He wore a green robe and sandals, and he looked to be in his thirties.

“Welcome,” the man said with a graceful half bow. “It has been too long since we have enjoyed the company of visitors.”

“Don’t play host to prisoners, Jamar,” Asia scolded.

He raised his eyebrows. “Prisoners, are they? That isn’t how Liam told it.”

“Since when has Liam known anything besides shaping?” Asia challenged.

Jamar gave an apologetic smile to the group. “Asia takes the defense of this castle very seriously.” He eyed Cole and the others in turn. “The day may come when we are indebted to her wariness, but I suspect that will not be today. The master will have the final word. He is aware of your presence and wishes to meet with you at once.”

Jamar stepped aside, and Asia motioned for Mira to enter. Cole passed through the door after her, entering a grand hall many stories high, with

stairs at the far end and tiers of balconies and galleries along the walls. Glowing globes spaced about the chamber provided steady luminance. Crystal trees with stained-glass leaves transformed much of the hall into a sparkling grove.

Not far from Jamar stood a dozen figures made of white wax, humanoid in size and form but faceless and smooth, like some department store mannequins Cole had once seen. Though they were all different sizes and builds, each one wore a green robe and carried some kind of weapon—a sword, a spear, or a knife. They generally held still, but a few of them shifted, revealing that they could move. One took a moment to stretch, arms raised, back arched.

“Look at this place,” Jace exclaimed breathlessly, eyes wide.

There was a lot to take in. Expertly carved marble statues filled alcoves. Frescoes decorated the ceiling, mosaics enlivened the floors, and tapestries brightened the walls. Gilded accents and enormous jewels embellished the railings and the furniture.

Leaving their other escorts outside, Asia joined them in the castle. She addressed Jamar. “Where will the master receive them?”

“In the Silent Hall,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Does he want us present?”

“Only at first.”

Asia shook her head. “He grows reckless.”

Jamar gave her a chiding look. “He is the master. Our place is not to question him.”

“My place is to protect him,” Asia said firmly.

“Not here,” Jamar corrected. “You control the external defenses. I manage affairs within these walls.”

“Where does that leave Liam?” asked a deep female voice. A giant pig made of stuffed quilts waddled into the hall from a neighboring room, short legs laboring below a rotund body. Even though it was bulky and ungainly, it was quite tall. Cole would have to jump to touch the quilted animal’s snout.

“In charge of the skies and the spies,” Asia answered. “Is he coming?”

“He’s working,” the patchwork pig explained.

“Is any of this work happening in bed?” Asia asked skeptically. “With the lights off? While he snores?”

“Maybe a little,” the pig replied. “He sent me as his representative to help transport our guests.”

Cole met eyes with Mira. He had to glance away for fear her expression would make him laugh. The pig was pretty ridiculous.

Asia exhaled venomously. “They’re not our guests yet. They’re potential enemies. I shouldn’t be surprised that Liam can’t be bothered.”

“He bothered to send me,” the pig said.

“The master is waiting,” Jamar reminded everyone.

The quilted pig knelt down. “I’m Lola. Climb aboard, if you please.”

Jace folded his arms across his chest. “I keep waiting for this to get less weird, and it keeps not happening.”

Cole had to agree. He had witnessed some bizarre sights in the sky castles, but he doubted whether anything could have prepared him for a ride on the back of a quilted pig through the most opulent palace he had ever seen.

“We’re with talented shapers,” Mira said, patting Jace’s elbow. “They can produce all sorts of strange semblances.”

“I’m with the boy on this one,” Asia said. “Liam shows little restraint with his imagination.”

“I’m right here,” the pig said.

“And you’re charming,” Jamar said. “A cozy, swinish pillow.”

“That’s a little better.” Lola sniffed. “You kids climb aboard before my feelings take another beating.”

Grabbing fistfuls of fabric, Cole scrambled up the side of the pig, pressing into her soft side with his knees and feet. It was like climbing a beanbag the size of a haystack. Once on top, he spread his legs wide to straddle the broad back just behind the head. Though understuffed enough to be cushy, the pig still felt relatively stable. The four of them fit on her without any trouble—Cole in the front, Mira kneeling behind him, then Jace, and Twitch in the rear. They would have had to squish together to add another rider.

“Comfortable?” Asia asked, her voice oozing sarcasm.

Cole rubbed his palms over the fabric in front of him. “Actually, yeah. What’s this material? It’s really soft, almost silky.”

“The boy has good taste,” the pig said.

“Let’s get this over with,” Asia grumbled.

Jamar and Asia led them away from the cavernous hall. The pig swayed as she waddled, but Cole felt reasonably secure. They moved through a room filled with musical instruments, including drums the size of hot tubs and a gleaming pipe organ that took up most of one wall. They passed through tinkling curtains made of long strands of tiny bells into a chilly room where

everything was carved out of ice—the furniture, the statues, the fireplace, even the rugs.

“Yep,” Jace muttered. “Weirder and weirder.”

“Cool, though,” Cole said, his breath pluming out in front of him.

After more chiming curtains, they entered a spacious ballroom with a polished wooden floor and a gargantuan chandelier. Jamar waved an arm, and the center of the floor melted away to reveal a broad stairway going down and out of view.

“Whoa!” Cole called as the pig toddled to the top of the stairs. On the level floor the pig was fine, but Cole was worried about tipping forward down the incline. “Should we hop off here?”

“Don’t worry,” the pig said. “Stairs are a specialty of mine.”

Lola leaned forward and started sliding on her belly. Gripping with his legs as best as he could and grabbing on to handfuls of fabric, Cole leaned back as they started down, tingles rushing through him. Once they were moving, the ride was surprisingly quick and smooth. After reaching the foot of the stairs, the pig kept sliding for a little ways along the polished marble corridor at the bottom.

“We lost Twitch,” Jace said.

Cole looked back. Twitch was nowhere in sight.

“He slid off my backside at the top of the stairs,” the pig said. “He’ll have to take the slow way with the others.”

After a few moments, Twitch came into view, walking down the stairs beside Jamar, Asia, and four of the waxy, robed guards. He waved sheepishly when he saw the others looking back at him.

“You should have stayed on,” Mira called. “It was fun.”

“I’m not big on unnecessary risk,” he answered.

When the others caught up, Lola crouched down and let Twitch climb back on. Jamar led the way forward.

At the end of the hall waited a large carved door. As they approached, it opened, and they passed through into a long chamber. Two rows of pillars supported the high, arched ceiling. The pillars were carved like stacked heads, and every head had four faces, one on each side. Black veins swirled through the red marble floor, and dark draperies softened the walls.

In the middle of the chamber sat a small old man on a modest chair. He stood as they entered, using a cane in each hand. The pig stopped ten paces from him and crouched down.

“Should we get off?” Jace asked.

“Yes,” Lola replied.

They all slid down the same side. The marble floor was hard and smooth underfoot. The quilted pig backed away.

The little man walked forward a few steps, relying heavily on his canes. He was almost bald, with a thin fringe of white around the sides of his lightly spotted head. His features disguised by wrinkles, he looked frail, like he belonged in a hospital gown. Instead, he wore a plain green sweater and brown trousers. The slippers on his feet left a clear view of his pale, bony ankles.

The old man paused. “Would you close the door, Jamar?” His voice lacked vitality.

The door swung shut.

The old man smiled awkwardly. He had very even teeth. “Well, you have uncovered our little secret, haven’t you? Happens on occasion, but not often, not often.”

He seemed to be waiting for them to respond.

“Are you the master?” Mira asked.

His smile widened, and he gave a weak chuckle. “I suppose so, especially if we’re still keeping this secretive. Welcome to Cloudvale, one of the least publicized hideaways in the five kingdoms. It’s a small province, but it’s free. We’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“We’re not spies,” Cole said.

“Now that I see you, I suspect that’s true,” the old man said, his smile fading a little. “The only one of you with the potential to transmit information out of here is definitely not allied with the High Shaper. Do you three boys know who you’re escorting?”

“We know enough,” Jace said.

“How much?” the old man asked Mira.

“Not everything,” Mira said. “You know who I am?”

“Yes,” he said. “How much do you trust them?”

“As much as I can trust anyone. They’ve all risked their lives for me.”

He nodded. “Have you figured out who I am?”

“I think so,” she answered.

He lifted one of his canes momentarily to point at her. “Out with it, then, young lady. Who am I?”

“You’re Declan Pierce, the Grand Shaper of Sambria.”



His smile grew wide again, eyes crinkling. “Guilty. Guilty as charged. Do you mean to continue in the company of these three boys?”

Cole watched Mira, as did Jace and Twitch. She considered them. “You don’t have to stay with me. Trouble will follow wherever I go.”

“I’m not going to leave you unprotected,” Jace said.

“Me neither,” Cole seconded.

“We’ve come this far,” Twitch added.

Mira faced Declan. “Then, yes, they’ll remain with me.”

“Would you like them to share in our counsel?” Declan asked. “It would mean revealing your identity.”

“Yes,” Mira said.

His smile vanished. “Leave us, Asia, Jamar. Lola, tell your maker to take a greater interest in current events.”

“Are you sure, sire?” Asia asked.

Annoyance flickered across Declan’s features. “We have sensitive matters to discuss. We’re not just meeting here because I adore drafty underground theatricality. You’ll be included when the time is right. Look to our defenses. We must stay on high alert going forward. That is all.”

The doors opened. Jamar exited with his wax people. Asia walked out beside the pig, and the doors swung shut.

Declan made his way back to the chair using his canes. Once in his seat again, he wiped perspiration from his brow, breathing shallowly. “I feel terrible sitting while you stand.”

“It’s fine,” Cole said.

“It’s rude,” Declan replied. “Old bones. Can’t be helped. Well, could have been helped, perhaps, with better planning. I didn’t anticipate visitors, and we need utter silence.”

“Can’t you just shape us some chairs?” Jace asked.

“Elsewhere, yes. But I mustn’t risk shaping in here. Any new shaping I perform could disturb the balance that keeps this room inscrutable from the outside.”

“We can’t be heard?” Mira asked.

“We probably couldn’t be overheard anywhere in Cloudvale, but this room makes it certain that nobody will eavesdrop. Young lady, it’s time to reveal your true identity. Would you like to do the honors, or should I?”

“Go ahead,” Mira said politely.

“The five daughters of Stafford Pemberton, High Shaper over the five kingdoms, were Elegance, Honor, Constance, Miracle, and Destiny. He never had a male heir. The girls supposedly died in an accident more than sixty years ago. Except they didn’t. They lived.”

“How do you know that?” Mira asked.

“Harmony has been in touch,” Declan said. “Stafford faked their deaths so he could hold them prisoner. He had somehow stolen their powers, but he needed them alive or he would lose his newfound talents. So a carriage dramatically plunged into a roiling river, and even as he locked his daughters away in a dungeon, the High Shaper pretended to mourn with the rest of us.”

“When he took their shaping abilities, the girls stopped aging,” Mira said. “The process wasn’t merely slowed—they are all as young today as the day their father betrayed them.”

“Their mother, Harmony, got wise to the plot and helped her daughters escape,” Declan continued. “The five royal princesses hide in exile to this very hour—Elegance, Honor, Constance, Miracle, and Destiny. Some of them may not even bother to use clever aliases.”

As the realization hit, Cole felt like the breath had been knocked out of him. It took him a moment to speak. “You’re Miracle.”

Mira raised her eyebrows. “I used a less obvious name for the first twenty years in hiding. With my family, I had always gone by Mira. As time passed, people forgot about my death. If I had survived, I should have been an adult. Instead, I was a slave girl. I stayed far from anyone who might have remembered my face. Regaining my true nickname never caused any problems.”

“No way,” Jace said. “You’re really Princess Miracle?”

She flashed an awkward smile and nodded.

“They call those five princesses the lost treasure of Junction,” Twitch said. “Everyone knows the story. They were all amazing shapers. After they vanished, the High King was never the same.”

Declan gave a sour chuckle. “Too true. He had taken their gifts, and with that new power, he found the courage to show his true colors.”

“I can hardly believe it,” Twitch said, dropping to one knee. “I should have been more respectful. I should have—”

“No,” Mira interrupted. “Get up. None of that. You’ve all been exactly what I need. Real friends in a time of hardship.”

Cole squinted at her as he did a quick calculation. “You’re in your seventies?”

“No, I’m eleven,” Mira said, her cheeks flushing. “I’ve just been eleven for a really long time.”

“Your nickname should be ‘Granny,’” Jace said.

“Ha-ha,” Mira replied. “I’m not an adult who looks like a kid. I’m a kid who never became an adult. Years going by isn’t the same as aging. I don’t change. I’ve always been treated like I’m eleven. I’ve always looked eleven. I’ve never really felt any older than that.”

“But you’ve lived for so long,” Twitch said.

“I’m sure I know more than a normal eleven-year-old,” she said. “I just don’t feel older. How could I? I’ve never *been* older.”

“You must have watched other people get old,” Cole said.

Mira brushed some stray hairs from her eyes. “Not for long. We moved a lot. Looking back is weird. I was ten so long ago. It’s been forever since I’ve seen anyone in my family. I saw Durny age, though, since he stayed with me.”

“Durny was your bodyguard?” Jace asked.

“My second protector. The first, Roderick, eventually got old and died. Even though we moved around, my mother has a way to find me. Many shapers have specialties. My mother has two—visions and the stars. Those abilities complement each other. She can find her daughters wherever we roam. She sent Durny to me after she sensed that Roderick had died.”

“You know,” Declan said, “I met your older sisters once—Elegance and Honor. They were quite young at the time. It was during my last visit to Junction, when I was first beginning to suspect that your father was not to be trusted. I should have given more serious heed to my instincts.”

“How did you recognize Mira?” Jace asked.

“I understand a thing or two about shaping, boy,” Declan said. “I can sense the power of a shaper. Her power has been stripped from her, and it is connected to a gathering mass of shaping energy elsewhere in Sambria. But a lesser portion of her gift is slowly returning to her. Only one girl in all the Outskirts would fully match that description.” His expression softened. “You poor child. You have endured some trying years. Sadly, I fear it will only get worse from here.”

“What should I do?” Mira asked.

“That’s the question. You shouldn’t stay here, and you shouldn’t go either, yet we have to do something. How much do you know about what your father did to you?”

“I know he took my power,” she said. “I still don’t understand how.”

“You’re not alone there,” Declan assured her. “It defies all knowledge of shaping.”

“I know I stopped aging,” Mira went on. “I know my power has slowly started coming back. And now Father has sent hundreds of legionnaires after me.”

“You know so little?” Declan asked, his voice sad. “We definitely need to talk.”

Twitch sat down on the floor, legs crossed. Cole did likewise, followed by Jace.

“I apologize again for the seating arrangements,” Declan said.

“This isn’t bad,” Cole assured him.

Declan shook his head. “Chilly and hard.”

“What can you tell me about my father?” Mira asked, not sitting, eyes intense.

“Not everything,” Declan said. “But I can shed some light on a few matters. Please, have a seat. This may take some time.”

## CHAPTER

## 21

# ANSWERS

**“H**ow often do you corresponded with Harmony?” Declan asked after Mira sat.

“Mother only contacts me indirectly,” Mira said.

“No messages?” Declan verified.

“Not really. She recently tried. She has a signal for when danger is coming. It can also lead messengers or new protectors to me.”

“Where is your current protector?”

“He just died. We got into trouble at a sky castle. Mother had sent her warning signal, so he was trying to collect floatstones to make a skycraft for our escape from Skyport, but he got killed. Then today, a messenger arrived right before a large group of legionnaires. I never got the message. I can only assume it was a warning that my father had found me. I wouldn’t have escaped Skyport without help from my friends.”

“These boys stepped in,” Declan said, sizing them up. “I take it you have names?”

“Jace.”

“I’m Cole.”

“They call me Twitch.”

“Three young slaves escaped from the Sky Raiders,” Declan said. “Not the most likely escorts for a princess of the highest royal family in the five kingdoms. Were you all born in Sambria?”

“I was,” Jace said. “I’ve been a slave since I can remember.”

“I was born in Elloweer,” Twitch said.

“I’m from Earth,” Cole said.

“Liam mentioned you,” Declan told Cole. “How did you arrive here?”

“Slave traders took my friends. I came here to help them but got caught.”

“You arrived voluntarily?” Declan asked.

“Nobody forced me,” Cole said. “I didn’t really know what I was getting into.”

“Interesting. A newly minted slave, I take it?”

“Just a couple of weeks. Two of my closest friends were taken to be slaves of the High King. Mira promised to help me find them.”

“And I’ll keep that promise,” Mira assured him.

The old man gave half a smile. “We will converse later, young man.” He studied Mira. “What do you know about all that has transpired since you went into hiding?”

“I know the basics,” Mira said. “We tried to stay informed. Father drove the Grand Shapers into exile. All except Paulus, who joined him. He set up governors to replace the Grand Shapers in the other four kingdoms.”



“Correct,” Declan approved. “Your father tries to pretend the Grand Shapers surrendered our posts willingly. That we retired.”

“People don’t believe that nonsense,” Jace said.

“You might be surprised,” Declan said. “As time goes by, it becomes easier to accept the claims of the current government, the one right in front of you, the one controlling the present. For example, the governors Stafford established have now taken to calling themselves kings. Even the Grand Shapers seldom emphasized that title.”

“How did you end up here?” Mira asked.

Declan looked around, as if reminding himself of his surroundings. “I knew of this place before your father moved to unseat me. More than any feature in Sambria, the cloudwalls have always fascinated me. As I made a study of them, I discovered this space behind the Eastern Cloudwall. I managed to access it by a roundabout fashion and decided it might prove a refuge in time of peril. When Stafford came after me, I fled here with some key members of my household and a pair of my most promising pupils. And here we have stayed, biding our time. All you see here, we shaped from scratch.”

“Were Asia, Jamar, and Liam with you from the start?” Cole asked.

“Asia and Jamar. Liam came later. All have great potential and significant ability, but none are ready to assume my duties as Grand Shaper. Asia is too harsh, and her shaping skills too narrow. Jamar is too interested in pleasing others. And Liam, the most gifted by far, is also the least serious. I’m not sure he will ever learn to focus, to plan, to lead.”

“Sounds like you want to retire,” Jace said.

Declan chuckled wheezily. “Look at me! I was never a strong man. My body is shutting down. I’ve lived far more than my share of years; many regular life spans. Even my mind shows signs of flagging. Let’s see, we have Cole, like the fuel. Twitch, like his mannerisms. And, I’m sorry, you are?”

“Jace.”

“Yes, of course. But it escaped me. Not long ago I could have learned a hundred names once and repeated them back a week later. My short-term memory begins to wane. I’ve held this post for too long, but how am I supposed to find and train a worthy successor from here? My refuge is also my prison. I would like nothing more than to be Grand Shaper emeritus. But reality doesn’t always align with our preferences.”

“How many other people live here?” Mira asked.

Declan blinked at her. “Actual people? You’ve met them all. Me, Jamar, Asia, and Liam. The rest are semblances.”

“What about the others you brought with you?” Jace asked.

“The people who came with me have passed away,” Declan said. “Only those with potent shaping skills can slow the aging process, as my apprentices have. With clearer foresight I might have brought more couples, but there was little time. One couple formed from those I brought, but they were unable to have offspring. The last of my regular staff passed on almost ten years ago.”

“Others must have come through the cloudwall,” Twitch said.

“The last explorers we know of came here more than fifty years ago,” Declan said. “We only rescued three out of the dozens aboard the large

skycraft. Liam wasn't with us yet, so our flying semblances were much less sophisticated. The trio we rescued have since died."

"When did Liam get here?" Cole asked.

Declan folded his hands and frowned, making him look like an elderly hospital patient who didn't like what he'd been served for lunch. "Liam came looking for me almost twenty years ago, and he found his way here in the same way I did, through the Boomerang Forest."

"Why was he looking for you?" Mira asked. "Was he a messenger?"

"No," Declan said. "He was a young, powerful shaper in search of a teacher. He had been taken as a slave but used his shaping to escape."

"Wait a minute," Cole said. "Liam? Did he make a talking happy face on a slave wagon?"

"Possibly," Declan said. "He had great talent at a tender age. I have done my best to instruct him, though our styles are very different. Much of what he does can't be taught or learned. He shapes by instinct. But I'm rambling. The old man's curse. You get lonely and your mind gets lazy, and you ramble. The topic should be Miracle and her father, Stafford Pemberton."

"What can you tell me?" Mira asked.

"Until you girls were divided from your powers, I had never imagined such a feat was possible. When Harmony first told me, I scarcely believed her. Though your father comes from a line of skilled shapers, the talent apparently skipped a generation. I had the opportunity to assess him when he was young. He had ordinary shaping ability, nothing more. But what might I have missed? I had no idea the shaping power itself could be manipulated, so in his case, I may not have known what to look for."

“I never saw him do much shaping,” Mira said. “I learned from my mother and from private tutors.”

“Stafford was not gifted in the traditional ways,” Declan said. “That much I can confirm. Yet he hid his mediocrity well, mostly by avoiding chances to shape in public. By all reports, each of his daughters and his wife were easily his superior. I know from experience that Harmony, Elegance, and Honor all practically glowed with ability. Conclusion? Either your father has unique talent, or he has access to arcane knowledge otherwise lost to the rest of us.”

“Have you any idea where he could have learned something like that?” Mira asked.

Declan gave a little shrug. “Here we enter the realm of conjecture. There are whispers of his elite Enforcers, claims that they possess unusual shaping skills. Do they all share the same secret? I have some talent with every known aspect of shaping, yet after learning that it was possible, I have utterly failed to touch the shaping power itself to any degree, despite years of study and effort. Stafford is either vastly my superior, or else he knows some technique that eludes me.”

“Have you talked to other Grand Shapers?” Mira wondered. “Perhaps the key lies with some other discipline.”

Declan rubbed the end of his cane. “Possible. The way shaping works in each kingdom is unique. The shaping in Creon is almost unrecognizable from the shaping here. I have only risked communication with Harmony. I’m not sure how to reach the others. None of us are eager to expose ourselves by reaching out too boldly. Honestly, despite the differences, I fail to see how the shaping styles in Zeropolis, Elloweer, Creon, or Necronum could take

hold of the shaping ability any more than the shaping we practice here in Sambria.”

“Then what do we do?” Mira asked.

“Keep your eyes open and your wits about you,” Declan suggested. “There has to be an answer to this riddle. Learning how your powers were taken could prove vital to fighting back.”

Mira huffed cynically. “It might be too late to fight back. I’d settle for avoiding him.”

“I understand,” Declan said. “Your father has more control over the Outskirts than any ruler in memory. I’ve hidden here for years—studying, planning, scheming, and taking little action. But an old man can dream.”

“After all this time, why are my powers returning?” Mira wondered.

Declan smiled, creases radiating from his eyes. He pointed at her, the finger gnarled and bony. “Now we shift to the most important topic. Have you regained many of your former abilities?”

“Just a little,” Mira said. “Only the most basic shaping. Nothing like before my powers were taken.”

“And you were just beginning to tap your potential,” Declan said. “Your father has been using your combined powers to assert dominance over the five kingdoms. After you five disappeared, he began to gradually reveal his new abilities. There was no reason for most to suspect he had not enjoyed such power all along. Who would dare oppose a man who was not only High Shaper, not only commander of the legion, but also adept in all five major styles of shaping? He has dealt harshly with any who opposed him. Except now—word has it that his abilities are suddenly waning.”

“Why?” Mira asked.

“Whatever unorthodox shaping bound your skills to him is unraveling,” Declan said. “But only a fraction of the power is returning to you. Most of it is gathering elsewhere in Sambria.”

“To someone else?” Mira asked angrily.

“Evidently not,” Declan said. “Liam and I have carefully traced the connections. Your power is running wild, Mira. On its own. Somehow, it is evolving into a mighty semblance.”

“What?” Mira exclaimed.

“I know,” Declan said, both palms raised, the skin there the smoothest and youngest-looking on his body. “It’s unprecedented. But your power has organized itself into some kind of entity.”

“Father stealing my power is one thing,” Mira said. “But how can my power exist outside of a person?”

“It remains connected to you. After all, it is your power. If you perish, it will perish with you. For this reason, your father meant to hold you prisoner, not kill you. Had you died, Stafford would have lost that portion of your ability he stole. The same is true now, except your power is operating independently.”

“How can my power have a mind of its own?” Mira asked.

Declan spread his hands. “I don’t know how the separation was accomplished in the first place, so it is difficult to speculate about what is going on. I assume it relates to how we develop a mind for a semblance. Perhaps some aspect of your father has united with your power and changed it into something new. Perhaps dividing you from your talent eventually

allowed it to shape itself. I can only guess. What we know for sure is that your power was recently wreaking havoc outside the town of Alvindale.”

“What was it doing?” Cole asked.

“No witnesses who got close escaped to tell the tale,” Declan said. “Same with the semblances Liam sent to spy—many failed to return. Those that came back brought only anecdotes. The people are calling it Carnag.”

“What?” Mira exclaimed. “Carnag is my shaping power?”

“You’ve heard of it?” Declan asked.

“Everyone has heard of it!” Mira said. “Sambria is in an uproar!”

“I suppose they would be,” Declan muttered. “There are dozens of incorrect origin stories. Accounts from a distance are unanimous that your power is leveling homes, scattering herds, tearing down trees, and erratically reshaping the countryside. Many people have disappeared.”

Mira held a hand over her mouth. She looked stricken. “It’s because of me? I’m hurting people? I’m wrecking communities? My power is out there causing harm, just like my power helped my father take control of the five kingdoms.”

“It’s involuntary,” Declan soothed.

“Maybe, but it’s still *my* fault.”

“Your father caused it. Not you.”

“If I were dead, this wouldn’t be happening.”

Declan raised his eyes and shook his head. “Why are the young so dramatic? And so rash?”

Mira looked irritated. “How should I feel?”

“You should think,” Declan said. “Solve the problem. Don’t leap to suicide as the best option.”

“Are there other options?” Mira asked.

“I should hope so,” Declan said. “There is a great deal of energy involved. Not passive energy that you could potentially summon. Active energy is out there, interacting with the world. Your power is free from any physical limitations your mind or body would have imposed. It’s pure, unrestrained, and volatile. Cut off that energy from its source, and we could have a disaster of epic proportions. Killing yourself would certainly destroy your power. The question then becomes how much of Sambria would be destroyed along with it.”

“It would explode?” Jace asked.

“Or worse,” Declan said. “That much unrestrained power wouldn’t go quietly.”

“Then what can I do?” Mira pressed.

Declan placed his palms together, tapping his fingers. “Here is where we must make some choices. Your father is desperate to reclaim you and your sisters. He wants to regain your powers, and he certainly doesn’t want you using your powers against him. Maybe he knows your powers are gathering outside of you, maybe not.”

“He sent hundreds of soldiers for her,” Cole pointed out. “They spoke about going after Carnag afterward.”

Declan gazed at Mira. “Your father was searching for you before now. But perhaps not desperately. He had your powers, you were out of the picture, and it had been smooth sailing for decades. His situation was not particularly



urgent. It would have been safer to have you under lock and key, but it wasn't essential. However, with his stolen talents fading, matters have changed. Going forward, all of his resources will be turned toward finding you and your sisters."

"Where can she hide?" Jace demanded.

Declan spread his hands again. "This is one of the best hiding spots in the five kingdoms. Unfortunately, the legion saw you come here. A portion of Mira's power remains with her father. It continues to seep away, but it is there. While any of her power remains with him, he knows that she lives. He will not rest until he finds where she went."

"Which will lead him to you," Mira said.

Declan shared a tight smile. "Some legionnaires will undoubtedly come through the cloudwall, probably not long after daybreak. They will all die. Everything that comes through the cloudwall is drawn into the void. It was expertly designed to that end. We can intervene by entering the vortex from our side, but of course we won't rescue our enemies."

"Did you design it?" Twitch asked.

Declan's answering laughter degenerated into a hoarse cough. He hawked up some phlegm, shakily produced a bag, and spat into it. "If I could have produced the terminal void, I would fear no being in the Outskirts or beyond. I have no idea who designed the Eastern Cloudwall and the void, or the Western Cloudwall with its staggering output. I cannot comprehend the mind that conceived the possibility let alone executed it."

"Could that person be hiding behind the Western Cloudwall?" Cole asked.

“Very doubtful,” Declan said. “I studied the Western Cloudwall for years, and there is no way behind or inside of it without being destroyed by the creative furnace that generates the castles. The cloudwalls have existed for all of recorded history. I suspect their creator designed them to be self-sustaining.”

Jace cleared his throat. “If everyone who comes here gets sucked into the vortex, maybe Mira should stay.”

Declan frowned and shook his head. “The legionnaires who brave the cloudwall will fail. But there is another way. Cloudvale is no island in the sky. This is a peninsula, jutting out from the Brink. Access is difficult, but I came here, as did Liam. Now that Stafford knows where to look, his people will find a way in.”

Mira winced. “I’m sorry to bring this trouble to you.”

“Can’t be helped,” Declan said. “It wasn’t deliberate. Your father was bound to catch up to us. This hiding place would not have concealed us forever. There are powerful shapers aiding Stafford. There are spies and mercenaries. Not only does he have the legion at his disposal, but also his secret police, the Enforcers. It was only a matter of time before his full attention turned to finding me.”

“Where should I go?” Mira asked.

Declan sighed, his eyes sad. “Stay here, and they will corner you and take you. Run, and sooner or later, they will catch you. I suggest you take the offensive. Track down your power.”

“The power that’s running wild?” Jace checked. “The power that leaves no living witnesses?”

“*Her* power,” Declan said. “This could be the chance you’ve been waiting for, Mira. Reclaim your power. Help your sisters reclaim theirs. I can’t risk more communication with your mother, not with all eyes turned my way, but from what I understand, I believe this is what she would want. It won’t be enough to run from Stafford. It won’t suffice to hide. You have to beat him.”

Mira returned Declan’s gaze. “How do I get my power back?”

“I’m not sure,” Declan said with a faint scowl. “I don’t understand how it was taken. I don’t fully grasp how it is acting independently. But I do know that it is *your* power. It cannot survive without you. So defeat it. Make it submit to you. If you must, kill the form it has taken. Exert mastery over your power, and it should return to you.”

“How do we know you’re not just telling her what’s best for you?” Jace challenged. “If she leaves, it will draw the attention away from here. Once she’s back out there, they’ll question whether she ever made it through the cloudwall. Maybe she snuck around it somehow, or hid in it temporarily, like we were planning to do. Then Mira attacks her power. If she defeats it, great. If it kills her, it destroys itself. Either way, for you, problem solved.”

Declan gave Mira a small smile. “Keep this one close. He clearly has your best interests at heart. The advice I shared does benefit me as well. That doesn’t make it insincere guidance. Heed as much of it as you choose. Your path is not mine to walk.”

“How would we leave?” Mira asked.

“That part will not be hard,” Declan said. “Liam will show you the way. And I will lend what aid I can to your quest. Why not sleep on it tonight? Decide in the morning.”

“All right,” Mira said. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“I wish I could do more to ease your burdens,” Declan said. He tapped one of his canes against the floor, and the door to the chamber swung open. “Go and rest. Jamar awaits without and will see you to your rooms.”

“Thanks,” Cole added to the mumbled gratitude of Jace and Twitch. He wondered how well they would sleep with so much to think about.

## CHAPTER

## 22

# VISITORS

**I**n Cole's room, every item of furniture balanced on a single leg. Not just the chairs and the table, but even the couch and the bed. He figured this was a way for a shaper to show off.

Supported by a slender central rod, the queen-size bed looked especially precarious. Cole tested it by leaning against the thick mattress and shaking it roughly. Though it swayed a little, the bed seemed improbably stable.

Cole sat down on a chair with a single leg. It wasn't connected to the ground—he had checked by moving it around. But when seated in the chair, no matter how hard he tipped his body, it refused to fall over.

Somebody knocked on his door. As he crossed the room, he wondered if it was Mira, wanting to talk about the choice she had to make. He still couldn't believe that she was a princess.

He opened the door and found Jace standing there. The other boy looked tired. His torn sleeve had grass stains on it. "Hey," he said.

"What's up?"

“Can we talk for a minute?” Cole backed away, and Jace entered, looking around the room. “Everything’s on one leg?”

“And it doesn’t fall over,” Cole said.

“Everything in my room is edible.”

“Do you usually taste furniture?”

“Jamar told me.”

“Is it good?”

“Not really. The curtains aren’t bad. Look. We need to talk about tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Cole said. “Want to sit?”

“I’m fine. In the morning, Mira will start hunting her power.”

“She told you?”

“She didn’t have to. I can tell. You heard Declan. It’s really her only choice.”

“Maybe she’ll make a run for it.”

Jace shook his head. “No way. Declan told her she might be able to get her power back. And that she can stop it from hurting people. And that it’s a better strategy than running or hiding. I saw her face. She’ll follow his advice.”

Cole paused. “I guess we’ll have to go with her.”

“Not necessarily,” Jace said slowly. “I won’t leave her. But you don’t have to stick around. She’ll have help. You’re not from here. This isn’t your battle.”

Cole frowned. Jace was giving him an out. Did he want one? Kind of. How were they supposed to beat some huge creature made of pure shaping power? Cole didn’t want to let Mira down, but he was also worried about

finding Dalton and Jenna and figuring out how they could get home. It sounded like Declan might have some ideas that could steer him in the right direction. He would make sure to bring it up tomorrow.

Jace had never been particularly nice to him. What was he up to?

“You don’t want me around?” Cole asked.

“I don’t really care,” Jace said, although it sounded like maybe he did. “It’s up to you. I’m just saying you don’t have to feel trapped.”

“What about Twitch?”

“I talked to him already,” Jace said. “He’s not too excited about it, but it looks like he’s coming, more out of duty than anything. He doesn’t want the High Shaper to get away with what he did. But I think partly he doesn’t want to be on his own as a runaway slave with the legion and the Sky Raiders on his tail. If you go your own way, there’s a chance he’d join you.”

“You just want to be alone with her,” Cole realized.

Jace reddened. “What are you talking about?”

“I can’t believe it,” Cole said. “Even after all this, you’re mostly worried about your crush.”

Jace took a deep, angry breath. “Don’t try to push your feelings onto me. Just because—”

“*My* feelings? Are you serious?”

“Cole, don’t mess with me about this.”

“I might have to if you’re trying to talk me out of coming.”

“This isn’t up to me. The choice is yours. I’m just not sure I’d try to force my way into a situation where I wasn’t wanted.”

“What?” Cole exclaimed. “You get that she was going to leave with me. We were going to sneak away tomorrow morning. Then the legion showed up.”

Jace grew very still. “You’re such a liar.”

“Why do you think she knew about my friends who the High King enslaved? She was going to help me find them. You heard us talking about it. Go ask her.”

Jace looked away, his lips twisting. He flexed his fingers. “This is hilarious. What are you saying? That I’m the intruder?”

“No. I’m saying that Mira and I were going to run away and help each other. She told me her secret because I saved her life. She decided she could trust me.”

Jace gave a stiff nod. “Then you want to come?”

“Not really,” Cole said. “I don’t know how we’re going to beat that creature. If it kills her, sounds like we’ll get to see what explosions look like up close.”

“It’ll have to go through me first,” Jace said.

“I get it. You’re brave. You really are. She’s lucky to have you. She needs all the help she can get. Working together got us this far.”

“You’re coming, then?”

Cole thought about it. Did he want to abandon Mira to her problems? She was the only real friend he had made in the Outskirts. And Jace and Twitch were the next closest. Could he leave Mira to their care? He had promised Durny to look after her, but Mira had told him he could go. Did he



want to be on the run alone? Not really. But what about Jenna? What about Dalton?

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “My friends have nobody helping them.”

“Right,” Jace said. “So what does that mean?”

“It means I need more information. I want to hear what Declan knows. My friends really need me.”

“Got it. Good to know where we rank.”

“Weren’t you just trying to get rid of me?”

“Maybe. Cole, I don’t like her how you think. We just found out she’s more than any of us have a right to dream about. She’s a real friend. I appreciate her. It’s not like . . . I just don’t want anything to happen to her.”

“Okay.”

“You better not say anything.”

“I get it,” Cole said. “I won’t.”

Jace looked calmer. “All right. See you in the morning.” He let himself out.

Cole walked over and flopped onto the bed. After all they had been through today, he could hardly believe that Jace wanted to add more drama. Jace obviously had it bad for Mira, but so what? They all had way bigger problems for now.

Cole buried his face in a pillow. Was he really going to ditch Mira? Maybe . . . if it meant saving Jenna and Dalton. But what if they were fine? What if they were becoming good shapers? What if they *liked* working in a palace? Thinking about the decision made him ache with doubt.

There was another knock at the door. Cole sat up. Could it be Mira this time? Or was Jace coming back with more inspirational thoughts?

Cole crossed to the door and opened it to find Liam waiting on the other side. "May I come in?"

"Sure," Cole said, stepping back.

Liam entered. He wore loose blue pajamas. It was the first time Cole had seen him not on his disk. "I did this room," Liam said.

"It's weird," Cole replied.

"Thank you. Mind if I sit?"

"No."

Liam plopped down on the couch, making it wobble. "How is Happy?"

"The face on the wagon? That *was* you!"

"One of my early semblances," Liam said. "I was glad to hear he's still out there. I wonder how many people have found him over the years."

"He still talks about you."

"And here we are talking about him. Did he cheer you up?"

"Actually he did. I was having a bad day."

"Anyone in that wagon is having a bad day."

"True." Cole sat down on a chair near the couch. "Did Declan tell you about our conversation?"

"No, I spied."

"What? I thought nobody could spy on that room."

"Nobody can penetrate it from the outside. I had Lola the Pig leave behind a tiny rendering. It sent vibrations to an earpiece that I wore. Nobody

else could have overheard. I take a greater interest in current events than Declan realizes.”

“Then you heard about Mira,” Cole said.

“Miracle, yes,” Liam said. “I suspected her identity when I first saw her up close and noticed the powerful shaping keeping her from her abilities. I’ve been helping Declan track the embodiment of her powers. It’s such a puzzle. Even right there in front of me, I still had no idea how they did it. Amazing work, really.”

“No fun for her,” Cole said.

Liam pointed at Cole’s chair, and it toppled over sideways. “Don’t be a downer. Of course it’s no fun for her. It’s still incredible.”

Cole had managed to break his fall with his hands. “Thanks for that.”

“I try to teach little lessons wherever I go,” Liam said. He waved a hand at his couch, and the support vanished. Rather than fall, the couch started floating gently.

“Why are you here?” Cole asked, shifting into a kneeling position.

“That’s deep,” Liam said. “I’m not sure I have enough focus to answer.”

“You heard what Declan said about you,” Cole realized.

Liam gave a little shrug. “At least when he talks behind my back, he sticks to the same things he says to my face. It’s actually kind of admirable.”

“Do you lack focus?”

“Absolutely. He was telling the truth. I’m not very serious. But I’m not sure it’s as big a weakness as he thinks. Get too serious and you freeze up. I may lack focus, but some important things catch my interest.”

“Like what?”

“Flashing lights. Dominoes. Pinball.”

“Pinball has flashing lights,” Cole said.

Liam grinned. “I’m sensing a pattern.”

“You guys have pinball?”

“In Zeropolis,” Liam said. “I went there as a slave. We know about a lot of stuff from your world. Most of us have our roots there. I notice many things from your world on the castles when they head down the void. I’m not sure how the items get there.”

Cole stood up. “Would you fix my chair?”

Liam snapped his fingers and the chair lurched upright. “You must hate it here.”

“I don’t know,” Cole said, sitting gingerly, making sure the chair would hold him again.

“They enslaved you!” Liam said. “Not a great way to encourage tourism.”

“How did you end up a slave?” Cole asked.

The couch had drifted up to the ceiling. Liam pushed off gently, and the couch glided lower. “I saved a bunch of orphans from a fire, and my freemark got charred. I was enslaved the next day while I was recovering.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yes. Ready for the truth? My parents sold me. Not my real parents. I never knew them. They supposedly died in a riot. The parents who raised me decided to sell me.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We lived on the border between Junction and Sambria. My parents didn’t like my shaping. They tried to get me to hide it. I didn’t. It was the

only thing I was good at! One day, I got sold, marked, and chucked into a slave wagon. Thanks, Mom! Thanks, Dad! Don't spend it all in one place!"

Liam talked like he was joking, but Cole heard real bitterness behind the words. "So you came here."

"Not right away," Liam said. "I had to escape first. And it took some effort to find Declan. Long, boring story."

"Was it hard to find your way in?"

"Much harder to get in than to get out. I found where Declan had entered and followed the faint path he left behind."

"Wait," Cole said. "Didn't he come here years before you?"

"The woods he came through make you turn around without knowing it. The Boomerang Forest. You walk in, stay on a straight course, and walk out the way you entered without ever turning."

"Really?"

"Yes. But Declan performed counter-shapings wherever the forest tried to turn him around. He adjusted certain places in the woods so he could move sideways or diagonally instead of backward. His shapings were left in place, and I followed them here."

"How do you like it?"

"Beats slavery. Beats parents who would sell me to slavers. I've learned a lot. It's kind of like a voluntary prison where I get to shape amazing things all the time. I won't stay here forever. Sounds like you four won't stay here past tomorrow."

Cole nodded. "Looks that way."

“You’ll have fun,” Liam said. “New experiences. Fighting a monster made of shaping power? Nobody has done that! Nobody can even guess what it would be like. The idea is revolutionary.”

“Do you think we can survive it?”

Liam scrunched his face in thought. “I should probably make a tomb. You know, the kind of memorial they use when you can’t retrieve the bodies? We can have the funeral before you leave. I could whip up some black clothes.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Who knows? It’s unprecedented. Sounded bad to me.”

“Me too.”

Liam fluttered his fingers and the couch drifted back to its former position. The single, slim support reappeared. “I should let you get some rest.”

Liam stood and went to the door.

“Liam,” Cole said, rising. “Why’d you come by?”

“I was curious about Happy. What a small world!”

“Is that all?”

“I couldn’t sleep and felt a little bored.”

“Okay,” Cole said. “Good night.”

“We’ll keep watch tonight. You’ll be safe. Try to settle down. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I have. Mine.”

Liam laughed. “Nice. I’m sorry you can’t stick around.” He walked out and snapped his fingers. The door banged shut.

Shedding his clothes, Cole crawled into bed. Liam was right about one thing at least: He needed sleep. Who knew when he would get a good rest again? Hugging a pillow against the side of his head, Cole tried not to obsess about what the next day would bring.

## CHAPTER

## 23

# GIFTS

**B**reakfast was spectacular the next morning. Eggs had been prepared in numerous ways—scrambled, hard-boiled, soft-boiled, poached, fried, deviled, baked, and pickled. Thick strips of bacon glistened in their crinkly glory. Various kinds of toast and pastries vied for attention, along with butter, honey, and jam. A vat of oatmeal had been sweetened with berries and sugar. Pies bulged with spicy potatoes, veggies, eggs, and sausage. Milk was available, and fruit juice, and numerous hot drinks.

Cole felt a little like a death-row inmate at his last meal. They were fattening him up so he could go get eaten by Mira's rampaging powers.

Jace acted unconcerned. He tossed berries into the air and caught them in his mouth. Mira and Twitch were more subdued. Declan and Jamar ate with them—Declan nibbling at a dry piece of toast, Jamar tearing into the spiciest pie and the pickled eggs. Jamar's waxy white assistants served the food and drink.



Cole had awakened to find nice clothes—exactly his size—laid out for him. Jace and Twitch had new clothes as well. Mira wore a much more flattering outfit, including a thin silver necklace and sparkly hairpins.

Cole still wasn't sure precisely what he planned to do. He wanted to corner Declan for advice, but he felt awkward bringing it up during the meal. Unless Declan had compelling alternatives, Cole figured he would leave with the others, then possibly split off when they reached a road to Junction.

After breakfast, Declan stood, supporting himself against the table. "I take it you have decided how to proceed," he said to Mira.

"We're going to leave," Mira said. "I'm going after my powers. The others can join me or go their own way as they choose."

Cole and Twitch made quick eye contact. Cole wondered how much temptation Twitch felt to take his chances on his own.

"Very well," Declan said. "I expected as much. It's really the only option, given the circumstances. I won't send you away without aid. Most of the semblances and renderings we create here would only function in close proximity to the Brink. The atmosphere near the cloudwalls is much more generous for shaping than elsewhere in Sambria. Nevertheless, I have instructed each of my apprentices to provide an item to help you on your way. These gifts will function anywhere in Sambria. They all belong to Mira. Those who accompany her will benefit from them as well. Asia! Liam!"

Asia entered the room, followed by Lyrus, who carried a wicker basket. She gestured toward him, and the soldier upended the basket on the floor, revealing a tangle of chains and iron balls.

“I call this the Shaper’s Flail,” Asia said. “It responds to a few commands. Flail, ready!”

At those words, the chains became untangled. Five of the iron balls reared up into the air like serpents poised to strike, some higher than others, each attached to one of the thick-linked chains. One ball stayed on the ground. Each ball had to weigh twenty or thirty pounds, and each chain connected to a central iron ring.

“It also responds to commands like ‘return,’ which will send it back to the basket; ‘follow,’ which will make it trail along behind you; ‘defend,’ which will make it protect something or someone; and ‘attack,’ which you should only say if you really mean it. The word ‘flail’ must precede the command for it to work. Flail, return!”

In a clattering blur, the mass of chains and spheres sprang smoothly into the basket. Cole and Twitch shared a glance. The new weapon would definitely bring some added protection.

“The flail is linked to Mira and will only respond to her,” Asia said. “She will guide it to targets with her thoughts and focus, but no effort will be required to determine how it attacks. The flail will also respond to the commands ‘capture’ and ‘threaten.’ As you might guess, don’t try to capture anything delicate. It isn’t a gentle rendering.”

“Thank you, Asia,” Declan said. “Jamar?”

The curly haired shaper stood and held up a red velvet sack with a golden drawstring. “I harvested one of our most abundant natural resources for your use. Massive amounts of water vapor are drawn into the terminal void every day, which means the cloudwall is somehow being constantly replenished.

This sack contains twenty thousand cubic yards of fog. It can empty in twenty seconds. Once empty, if you turn the bag inside out, it can swallow up to twenty thousand cubic yards of fog at the same rate. Use it over and over if desired.”

“Are there commands?” Mira asked.

“‘Empty slow,’ ‘empty medium,’ ‘empty fast,’” Jamar rattled off. “They work when the mouth of the sack is open. When inside out, ‘fill slow,’ ‘fill medium,’ and ‘fill fast.’ No need to make it complicated.”

“Or useful,” Liam said, entering the room on a hovering disk. “Unless they want to ruin an afternoon at a small beach.”

“Perhaps they’ll need to confuse their enemies,” Jamar said.

“Can they see through the fog better than others?” Liam asked.

“They can release the fog behind themselves during an escape,” Jamar said less patiently. “They could fill enemy barracks. Or obscure a courtyard.”

“I guess it could come in handy,” Liam allowed. “Asia’s gift was as subtle as ever.”

“I’m not sure subtlety will be their greatest need,” Asia said.

“Well, I’ll provide some, anyway.” Liam whistled, and a bird flew to his shoulder—a white-and-gray cockatiel with a yellow crest and orange cheeks. “This is Mango.”

“You’re my new masters,” the cockatiel said in an eager voice, only vaguely birdlike. “I’ll spy for you and do whatever else I can to keep you safe and informed.”

“She’ll answer to any of you,” Liam said. “That way if Mira gets knocked unconscious or is otherwise indisposed, you can still give Mango orders. But

if you split up, Mango will stay with Mira.”

The cockatiel flitted from Liam’s shoulder to Mira’s. She stood about six inches tall, not counting the long tail feathers. The bird cocked her head and whistled. Mira petted it gently.

“Her wings feel strange,” Mira said.

“Strange?” Mango challenged, ruffling her feathers.

Now that Mira mentioned it, as Cole leaned closer, the bird didn’t look quite right. The texture of the feathers seemed too smooth and shiny.

“Mango is made from a light substance I designed,” Liam said. “I call it ristofly. It makes her much more durable than if she were composed of flesh and actual feathers. She can fly faster and see better than most real birds. She doesn’t need food or water, doesn’t sleep, doesn’t relieve herself, and can dwell underwater as easily as in the air.”

“See how handy I am?” Mango said. “And you sum it up with ‘strange.’”

“Sorry,” Mira said. “I didn’t mean any offense.”

Asia exhaled derisively. “A semblance that requires apologies? Brilliant work, Liam. Very subtle.”

“I’m plenty subtle,” Mango snapped. The bird hopped close to Mira’s ear. “I won’t let anyone sneak up on you. I’ll steer you away from danger. And you can command me to do just about anything. If I don’t understand, I’ll let you know.”

“You made her in one night?” Mira asked Liam.

“Sort of,” Liam replied. “I repurposed one of my best spy birds. But I completely reshaped and refined her, added some spunk.”

“She’s so lifelike,” Mira said.

“Few shapers could manage such a creation,” Declan said. “Flying semblances are hard. Personalities are harder. None of us can replicate lifelike humans and other beasts to match the ones the Western Cloudwall creates. Semblances like Lyrus are uniquely realistic.”

“Could Lyrus come with us?” Cole asked.

“I would relish nothing more than an adventure,” the soldier said.

“I’m aware,” Declan replied. “But nothing we can do would allow you to leave here and survive. That aspect of you is beyond any of our abilities to tamper with. It would be like trying to shape an actual human—there is too much complexity to cause anything but disaster. The semblances from the sky castles can only survive on the castles or here on the peninsula.”

“Then why can Mango come with us?” Cole asked.

“It is easier to make semblances out here beyond the Brink,” Declan said. “Most of the semblances and renderings we create can’t leave. But with effort, we can design semblances and renderings that could survive elsewhere in Sambria, just as most nonliving renderings from the sky castles can survive elsewhere.”

“Forgive me if I spoke out of turn,” Lyrus said, head bowed.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm,” Declan said. “If I could make a gift of you to help these young people on their way, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“You’ve already done so much,” Mira said. She made eye contact with Asia, Jamar, and Liam. “Thank you for the gifts.”

“We’re not done yet,” Declan said, sounding mildly offended. “I haven’t given you mine.”

“There’s more?” Mira asked.

“How about this for starters?” He waved an arm in a wide gesture and Cole felt his wrist tingle.

All four kids investigated the sensation. Cole saw that the mark tattooed there had changed.

Jace gasped. “It’s a freemark,” he said reverently.

“That’s right,” Declan said. “It would be difficult to go abroad marked as slaves.”

“You can’t change a bondmark!” Mira exclaimed.

Declan gave a small smile. “Most people can’t. They’re designed to be permanent. The shaper who developed them was a student of mine.”

“Just like that,” Twitch said, rubbing his wrist.

“It looks real,” Jace marveled.

“It *is* real,” Declan said. “Those new marks are indistinguishable from authentic freemarks. They have been reshaped. No traces of the original bondmarks remain. No shaper or needle master can claim otherwise.”

“I can hardly believe it,” Mira said.

“There’s more,” Declan said. “Join me outside.”

Declan moved a finger and his chair hovered up and away from the table. Advancing at a pace that let the others keep up, he led the way to the courtyard. At first Jace didn’t follow the others. It took a nudge from Cole to stop him from staring at his freemark.

Beyond the castle doors, an odd carriage awaited in the courtyard. The enclosed compartment rode on four wheels—not fancy, but clean and well crafted. At the front, instead of a horse, there stood a huge black brick with legs.

“An autocoach,” Jace said.

“For us?” Mira asked hopefully.

“For you,” Declan said. “I could have modified it to move faster. I could have made it more elaborate. But I thought it wiser to make it as typical as possible.”

“Won’t it raise suspicions to see four kids with their own autocoach?” Twitch asked. “Free or not.”

“Astute,” Declan said. “Wearing nice clothes will help, which is why we updated your wardrobes. The last part of my gift also tried to address that problem. Bertram?”

The door to the autocoach opened, and an old man with a close-cropped white beard leaned out. He was dressed in a slightly shabby, old-fashioned suit. “What was that? My hearing isn’t so keen.”

“State your business,” Declan ordered.

The old man’s eyes widened. “How’s that? My business?” He absently patted his pockets. “Yes, well, if I wish to show my grandniece and grandnephews a bit of the countryside, I suppose it is my business. That’s enough chatterboxing. I feel past my prime today, and my joints ache something terrible.” Coughing, he closed the carriage door and leaned back out of view.

“That’s quite a semblance,” Mira said.

“Not my best work,” Declan lamented. “Don’t look to him for profound conversations. But Bertram should hold up well enough while you remain in Sambria. He won’t leave the carriage unless forced, mostly because I doubt

his authenticity can withstand close inspection. But he should serve to deflect attention if questions get asked about four youngsters traveling alone.”

“Four kids and an old man,” Cole muttered. “What if somebody decides to rob us?”

“We’ll have our gear,” Jace said. “Right?”

“Your items are already stowed in the autocoach,” Liam said. “I strengthened the shaping of the Jumping Swords to help ensure they would hold up through Sambria. The other objects should continue to function very well.”

“How’s my rope?” Jace asked, an edge to his voice. “It wasn’t working last I saw.”

“It was still functional,” Liam corrected. “I had merely severed its connection to you so it wouldn’t respond to your commands.”

“Will it now?” Jace asked.

“I restored the connection,” Liam assured him. “You don’t have to act so put out. I was doing you a favor. Asia would have cut the rope.”

“The rope is tough to cut,” Jace said.

“Maybe with normal weapons,” Liam replied. “Asia’s blade has a miraculous edge. It would have slashed through your rope like it was smoke, and your rendering would have been ruined, probably permanently.”

“Then thanks, I guess,” Jace mumbled.

“We’ve stored food and water in the autocoach as well,” Asia said. “You’ll find the food packed under the seats, and your gear in a compartment beneath the floor. We included some money to help you on your way. Bertram can assist if you have trouble finding anything. We suggest you leave



now. The less time you allow the High Shaper to move his forces into the area, the better chance you'll have to make a clean getaway."

"The top speed of the autocoach is not impressive," Jamar said. "Compare it to a horse at an easy trot. But the autocoach can maintain that speed indefinitely. It needs no food, no water, no rest."

"So if we get chased, we might be in trouble," Cole said.

"If dangerous enemies are in close pursuit, you may have to abandon the vehicle," Asia said. "But the autocoach will only operate for Mira. This is standard enough that thieves will have little interest in the coach itself. Your belongings could be another story."

"Does it know where to go?" Mira asked.

"Unless you issue new instructions," Declan said, "the autocoach will take you to Middlebranch. Bertram can advise you about alternative routes and destinations. If you reach Middlebranch, seek out Gerta, a shaper. The locals call her 'the herb woman.' She could be a source of guidance. Most of my old colleagues are dead or in hiding. Gerta has no love for the High Shaper and is among the few from the old days who you can reliably find."

Mira nodded. "Thank you for everything. It's much more than we could have hoped for."

"I wish I could do more," Declan said. "For the first time in decades, your father has shown hints of vulnerability. He will move aggressively to reestablish the certainty of his reign. Evade him. Survive. Trust your instincts. Liam will catch up to instruct you about leaving Cloudvale."

Mira gave Declan a peck on the cheek, then started toward the autocoach. Jace had lifted the hatch in the floor and was examining his golden rope.

Beside him, Twitch searched the compartment, probably looking for his ring.

Lingering behind, Cole studied the withered old man in the floating chair. Declan watched him expectantly.

“We need to talk before I leave,” Cole said. “I’m not from here. Is there any chance of me ever getting home?”

Declan brought the chair close and spoke loud enough for Cole’s ears only. “I was beginning to wonder whether you would seek my counsel. There are ways for you to return to your world. Staying there will be slippery. This is a question for the Wayminders of Creon.”

“I briefly talked to a Wayminder,” Cole said. “It was the guy the slavers hired to help them reach my world. He told me the same thing—that I could probably get home, but that it would be hard to stay. I came here so unexpectedly. I still don’t really get where I am. What is the Outskirts? It’s almost like a dream.”

Declan gave a snort. “Almost, especially here in Sambria, where certain aspects of reality can be adjusted. I have studied this question, as have others. The most I know is that the Outskirts is an in-between place. One of the five kingdoms seems to lie between life and death, another between reality and imagination, another has pockets outside the normal order of time and space, and another stretches the limits of technological innovation. As you noted, Sambria seems to lie between wakefulness and dreaming. Where else besides dreams can you rearrange the world according to your whims?”

Cole nodded. “Only here.”

“Each kingdom has its own kind of shaping,” Declan said. “Each has its own wonders and mysteries. I’ll let you in on a Sambrian secret. It may only

be the fancy of an old man, but I suspect that the Western Cloudwall taps into dreams to form the castles. Could be dreamers in your world, or ours, or both, or more worlds than we can guess. Troubled dreamers, it seems to me. Perhaps failed dreamers. Call it a hunch.”

“That might explain why some of the castles have stuff from my world,” Cole said.

“It could explain that and more,” Declan agreed. “But the issue is mostly academic. Here is the lesson you must learn—the Outskirts may feel dreamlike at times, but this is no dream. In a dream, if you get into trouble, you can eventually wake up. You will not wake from this, Cole. If you get hurt, you will suffer. If you get killed, you will die.”

“I believe it. I can tell the difference between being awake and being in a dream. I’ve slept and had dreams since I came here. I’ve been hungry and thirsty and tired and scared. None of that felt like a dream. Some things are unbelievably weird, but it’s all way too real.”

“That’s right,” Declan said.

“I’m worried about the other kids who came here from my world,” Cole explained. “Especially my two best friends.”

“The pair who went to the High King as slaves,” Declan said. “You’re certain of their destination?”

“Some woman tested us for shaping potential,” Cole said. “I had none. She called me the worst of the bunch. Kids with the most shaping ability were put into cages to go to the High King. That included my friends Jenna and Dalton.”

“When we met, you mentioned you came to the Outskirts voluntarily,” Declan said.

“Right,” Cole said. “I didn’t know where I was going, but nobody forced me. I was trying to help my friends.”

“The slavers didn’t know you came through on your own?”

Cole shook his head. “The Wayminder saw me after I came through and gave me a little help. I didn’t want him to get in trouble, so I pretended I arrived with the others but slipped away.”

Declan gave a frail chuckle. “That explains why you weren’t sent to the High Shaper.”

“What do you mean?”

“People who come to the Outskirts from your world tend to have more shaping potential than the average citizen born here, which explains why the slavers went to your world looking for slaves with shaping talent. People who come here voluntarily from your world, rather than by accident or compulsion, tend to have far greater ability than most.”

“Then why didn’t the woman see any shaping potential in me?” Cole asked. “When I came here, I didn’t really know where I was going. Maybe that counts as ending up here by accident.”

“No,” Declan said. “If you followed the slavers, you purposely entered. You didn’t blunder into it by happenstance. Unsure of where it would lead, you chose to follow them, and that is deliberate. The shaping power manifests differently for someone who chooses to come to the Outskirts. It’s a rare occurrence.”

“What makes it different?”

“You become much more likely to develop more than one kind of shaping talent, and those talents tend to be unusually strong. But the abilities take longer to show up. I don’t currently see shaping potential in you. Not any. That is rare. Almost everyone has at least a little shaping talent. Having absolutely none is less common than having a lot. I expect that one day, you’ll discover powerful skills.”

“Really?” Cole said, excited by the thought of having ways to help his friends besides flying through the air with a sword. “How long will it take?”

Declan shrugged. “That’s where it gets complicated. It could take years. Or it could never happen.”

Cole’s excitement dimmed. “Is there anything I can do to speed it up?”

“I’m unaware of any techniques that would hasten the process,” Declan said. “But I do know this: If the slavers were looking for slaves with shaping potential, and they knew you came through voluntarily, and they saw that you displayed zero potential, you would have been their top pick.”

“Even though I might be a dud?” Cole asked.

“They would gladly take that chance. According to the odds, your talents will show up eventually, and when they do, they’ll be strong.”

“But that potential doesn’t help me much right now,” Cole said.

“True,” Declan said. “Perhaps not for a long time.”

Straightening, Cole steeled himself. “With or without shaping powers, I need to help my friends. Do you know how I can find them?”

“If they went to Junction City, I could direct you there,” Declan said. “So could Mira. Many people you would meet could point you in the right direction. But stealing a slave is a serious crime. According to the laws of the

land, your friends legally belong to the High King. I don't expect you could free them on your own. Even if you managed it, I doubt you would remain free. You'd be caught and punished, as would they."

"You're saying there's nothing I can do?" Cole asked in frustration. "I have to try. It's my fault my friends are here in the first place. I took them to the place where they were kidnapped."

"Deliberately?" Declan asked.

"Not on purpose," Cole said. "But my friends got grabbed. The slavers only missed me by accident."

Declan pressed his fingertips together. "There may be ways for you to help your friends. However, if you go to Junction alone and try to free them, you will probably fail. Here is my advice: Stay close to Mira. If she defeats Carnag and reclaims her power, it will deal a major blow to the High King. Mira could become the focal point of a revolution. Before Stafford claimed the throne, it was unlawful to go beyond the Outskirts to hunt slaves. The best way to free your friends would be to topple his regime."

"The High King made it legal to take slaves from Earth?" Cole asked.

"Before Stafford, that was always forbidden," Declan said. "The Outskirts has a long and unfortunate history of slavery, but at least there were limits. Believe it or not, the High Shaper before Stafford wanted to abolish slavery entirely. But Stafford pushed everything in the opposite direction. Now slavery thrives more than ever."

"My friends and I aren't the first people taken from my world as slaves?"

Declan shook his head. "Far from it."

“Then why haven’t I heard of mass kidnappings?” Cole asked. “When the slavers came after me and my friends, they took dozens of kids. It should be major news.”

“Ah,” Declan said. “The Wayminder didn’t explain it all to you.”

“We only talked a little.”

“Cole, when people travel from your world to ours, those who know and love them best remember them the least.”

Back at the slave caravan, the redheaded guard had claimed that their parents wouldn’t remember them. Cole had assumed the man had been exaggerating. It took him a moment to muster a reply. “My parents won’t remember me?”

“Those who should remember you most will have forgotten all about you,” Declan confirmed. “They no longer know you exist.”

“What about someone like my teacher?” Cole asked. “I’m on the class role. Won’t she notice I’m missing when she takes attendance? She’ll call my name. . . .”

“Your teacher won’t notice,” Declan said. “As people try to focus on you, they’ll end up ignoring you. Evidence of your absence may remain, but people won’t pay attention to it. Not your family. Not anyone.”

Cole chewed his bottom lip. He and his friends were even more alone than he had realized. Nobody missed them. Nobody was looking for them. Getting home really was all up to him. And if they got home, what then? “Can it be fixed? Will they ever remember us?”

“Save that question for a Wayminder,” Declan said. “I simply don’t know.”

Cole wanted to scream. What if he had permanently been wiped from the minds of his family? If he ever made it home, his life might never be the same. It was too awful to contemplate. He had to believe there was a way to repair the problem. “Why did the High Shaper expand slavery?”

“I can only guess, Cole,” Declan said. “Maybe he likes the economics. Slaves increase many opportunities for the ruling class. Also, slaves from Earth are more likely to be strong shapers. I know he adores power.”

“You’re right about one thing,” Cole said, anger smoldering inside. “The High King is my enemy. He ripped me and my friends from our lives. He’s holding my best friends captive. But he’s the king! How am I supposed to overthrow him?”

“You’re not alone,” Declan replied. “That’s my point. You need support. A rebellion has been brewing for some time. The four exiled Grand Shapers all want to see Stafford fall. During his rise, he made many enemies. The return of his lost daughters could be the key to his ruin. Help Mira, and the chance to truly free your friends could follow. Even a failed rebellion could provide you with the help and the distraction you would need to liberate your friends.”

Cole tried to sort through the pros and cons. Staying with Mira would mean delaying any rescue attempt. But if it improved his chances to succeed, it might be worth it. When he had tried to save his friends back at the caravan, he got caught in no time. He didn’t want to repeat that mistake. Jenna and Dalton would probably be much harder to free from the royal palace. Once free, where would they run? Cole wasn’t sure whether they could ever get home.



He looked over at the autocoach. He didn't want to abandon Mira. This gave him a real reason to stay with her. It would also give him time to see if he developed any shaping powers. If he could help Mira weaken the High King before he charged in to save his friends, maybe Mira and some of her allies could assist him in return.

Cole folded his arms. Did he want to go after his friends on his own? Or would he rather face Carnag with Mira? Either option could lead to failure. Either could get him killed. Neither path would be easy, but staying with Mira felt right.

"Sticking with Mira makes sense," Cole finally said.

"I agree," Declan said. "Your interests are aligned. You need each other. Help her succeed, and you'll triumph as well."

Cole was almost too scared to ask his next question. "What are our chances? Can we beat Carnag? Could we win a revolution?"

"Your chances are small," Declan said. "But great movements have started small before. Take it one step at a time. You have more power than you know. So does Mira."

Cole nodded pensively. He felt like he should keep Declan talking. There had to be more questions he could answer. Cole knew so little about the Outskirts, and Declan knew so much. But his friends were waiting in the autocoach, and the questions refused to form. "The Wayminders are in Creon?"

"And elsewhere," Declan said. "But they come from Creon. The least of them knows more about traveling beyond the five kingdoms than I do."

Cole searched his mind for anything else he should ask. He knew he would kick himself later. Nothing was coming, and they needed to hurry.

“I can see your anxiety,” Declan said kindly. “Relax, my boy. You’re here. You can’t change that all at once. Take it one day at a time. Learn as you go. You have many knots to untie, but you won’t unravel them all today. How well did you understand your old world? How it originated? Its deepest mysteries and secrets? I know the Outskirts feels foreign, but you don’t need to understand everything about a world to live in it. Stay close to Mira. I wish you well.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Cole said. “Watch out for the bad guys.”

Declan gave a small wave. “We always keep watch.”

“Enjoy your quest,” Lyrus said, placing a large hand on Cole’s shoulder. “I envy you.”

“Thanks, Lyrus. I’ll try to be brave.”

“I have no doubt,” the warrior approved.

Feeling he had kept his friends waiting too long, Cole ran to the autocoach and jumped inside. He sat on the bench beside Twitch and Jace, opposite Mira and Bertram.

“Go,” Mira said as she leaned forward and closed the door. Smoothly, the autocoach began to move.

## THE QUIET WOOD

**T**hat was quite a talk with Declan,” Jace said. “Have you decided when you’re ditching us?”

Mira looked unsettled by the blunt question. Cole could tell she didn’t want him to go. He wasn’t eager to leave. But she had Jace and Twitch, while Dalton and Jenna had nobody.

“I’m with you guys at least until Carnag,” Cole said. “My best chance to help Jenna and Dalton is to weaken the High King. And that means helping Mira. Let’s get her powers back. We’ll figure out our next move after that.”

“There’s no guarantee we’ll defeat Carnag,” Mira warned.

“I know,” Cole said. “But I don’t think I’ll have much chance trying to take a couple of slaves from the High King on my own.”

“That’s true,” Mira said.

“Your father made the laws that allowed those people to come for us,” Cole said, trying not to let his tone get too heated. He was mad at her father,

not Mira. The High King had wrecked her life too. “He owns my friends according to those laws. Declan wants us to overthrow him. I like that idea.”

“It’s hard to imagine,” Mira said. “He’s clever and brutal. Still, this could be the first step in that direction. When my mother sent us away, she promised that one day we would return and inherit all we lost.”

“First things first,” Jace said. “Let’s try to escape in one piece.”

When they reached the edge of Declan’s sanctuary, Liam appeared in the window and asked Mira to halt the autocoach. The vehicle came to an even stop, and the kids climbed out. Ahead, the path disappeared into a mossy forest. Cole was surprised to see two other autocoaches behind them.

“What’s with those?” Cole asked, nodding at the carriages.

“Declan had some extras on hand,” Liam said. “He decided it might confuse your pursuers to send a pair of empty autocoaches in different directions. If you ever cross paths with one again, they will answer to Mira. Otherwise they’ll loop through a long preset course.”

“Smart,” Twitch said, nodding in approval.

“He does have centuries of experience,” Liam said. “I’ve sent Mango ahead. She will report back to you periodically, but especially if danger approaches.”

“Any trick to these woods?” Jace asked.

“Not getting out,” Liam said. “The autocoach will do the work. Don’t let the easy exit fool you. If you try to backtrack to this place, with or without the autocoach, it’ll just lead to frustration. You’d have a better chance braving the cloudwall again.”

“Once was plenty,” Mira said.

“After you’re through, you’ll notice the trees get bigger,” Liam said. “That’s the Quiet Wood. Don’t speak until the trees get small. You might hear some strange sounds. Say nothing. Not to one another, not to any creatures you see, not to yourselves. The semblances who prowl the Quiet Wood are attracted to speech from nonsemblances. Talk, and they will hunt you down.”

“You tell us this now?” Cole exclaimed.

“Now is when you need to know it,” Liam replied calmly. “Why do you think I came to see you off? For a second farewell? In the direction you’re heading, it’ll take an hour or more to pass through the Quiet Wood. When the trees return to normal size, you’re clear. You shouldn’t have trouble if you keep silent. Most people stay well away for obvious reasons.”

“What kind of semblances would attack?” Jace asked.

“Imagine giant bears that hunt in packs, and you’ll have the basic idea,” Liam replied.

“Are you serious?” Cole cried. “What’s with this place?”

Liam looked taken aback. “Sambria is the result of centuries of shapers tampering with the environment. Some in big ways, others in small ones. Certain big changes fade, and some of the minor ones have greater impact over time. It’s hard to predict. The Quiet Wood is neither the strangest nor the most perilous region of Sambria. Bertram will guide you around the worst areas. He’ll take you on safe roads to Middlebranch. If something gets in your way, he’ll improvise. Won’t you, Bertram?”

“Not bad weather for an outing,” the old man remarked from the autococh. “It’s not every day I go for a ride with my young relatives.”

“Not much personality,” Liam whispered conspiratorially. “Declan tends to be more about function than ornamentation.” He stopped whispering. “Bertram knows the geography. One perk of Sambria is that over the years, shapers have laid down many roads and paths, even through wild and otherwise inaccessible country.”

“Any other hazards we should know about?” Twitch asked.

“Mountains of them,” Liam said. “But who knows which ones you’ll encounter? We don’t have the weeks it would take to list them all. You have handy renderings and your common sense. Use them well.” He elevated upon his disk. “I can’t emphasize enough, no talking in the Quiet Wood. Remember that, and your trek should start out fine. Forget it, and you won’t get a second chance.”

“Thanks for everything,” Mira said earnestly. “We came here expecting to die. We leave with a fighting chance.”

“Good luck on your journey,” Liam said, raising a hand in farewell. “Remember, if you get into horrible trouble and desperately need me, I’ll be much too busy with my own problems!”

With that he sped off.

The four kids looked at one another. Jace and Cole burst out laughing.

“It may not be funny before long,” Twitch mumbled.

Jace rubbed away his smile. “We might get into trouble, but it’ll still be funny.”

“We should go,” Mira said, climbing back into the autocoach. “Think you three can keep your lips sealed?”

“We’ll see,” Cole said. “Sometimes when it’s really quiet, like during a test, or in the library, I get this urge to shout something just to break the silence and surprise everyone.”

Mira assumed a patient expression. “Um, Cole, you’re going to have to control that urge.”

“I’ve never given in and shouted,” Cole assured her. “And for the record, getting eaten by giant bears is the best reason I’ve ever had to keep my mouth shut.”

“Should we stop talking now, you know, to be safe?” Twitch asked.

“We’re not moving yet,” Jace pointed out.

“Go ahead,” Mira commanded.

The autocoach started rolling forward, accompanied by the soft clomping of the walking brick’s strides. Now that he listened mindfully, Cole heard the other autocoaches following.

“We’re moving now,” Twitch observed.

“Then I agree we should shut up,” Jace said.

“All in favor?” Cole asked, raising a hand.

The other three kids raised their hands. “Aye,” Mira said.

“As long as I get the last word,” Jace said.

“What if I want it?” Mira asked.

Jace gave a slow grin. “Then you’ll have to take it.”

“Maybe I will,” Mira said.

“I will for sure,” Jace said, his stare level.

“Guys, are you sure this is a good time to play chicken?” Cole asked. The autocoach was entering the forest.

“We have until the trees get big,” Jace said.

“It’s the Boomerang Forest first,” Mira agreed.

“Any chance of getting slaughtered by giant bears is too big of a risk,” Twitch said.

“Getting in on the contest too, Twitch?” Jace asked.

“Just trying to be the voice of reason,” Twitch explained. “How about you guys say something at the same time? You can both have the last word!”

Jace shrugged. “Seems like a nice, reasonable, cowardly way to settle it. Count me out.”

“Me too,” Mira said. “You’re not going to beat me.”

Jace smirked. “I will if I’m willing to get eaten by bears.”

“Are you?” Mira asked.

“Out of stubbornness?” Jace asked. “Sure, why not? I considered myself dead on my first sky castle mission. Helped my nerves. The rest of this is just borrowed time. A bonus.”

Mira narrowed her eyes. “But things have changed. You’re not a Sky Raider anymore.”

Jace cocked his head, as if unsure he believed her. “The danger feels about the same. Or worse.”

“What about that freemark?” Mira asked, glancing at his wrist.

Jace jerked a little, the comment cracking his facade. He rubbed his wrist and stared out the window. “You’re right. That hasn’t really sunk in yet.” He glanced her way. “I guess . . . it would be stupid to throw my life away to win some little contest.”

“Right?” Mira said appreciatively.



“Of course, if you’re going to die . . . ,” Jace said.

“Might as well be doing something stupid?” Mira finished. “The good stupid is the brave kind. When there’s a real reason behind it. Bad stupid is everything else.”

“The same is true for you,” Jace said. “You’re being just as obstinate. Just as dumb. So why do I have to back down?”

“To show you’re the bigger person?” Mira tried.

“I don’t get how losing makes me big,” Jace said.

They were well into the woods now. Cole stared out the window. The path had become twisty. Did the trees look larger? A little, maybe. Not way bigger yet. How big had Liam meant?

“Guys,” Cole said. “We’re deep in the woods. The trees are looking bigger. This isn’t funny anymore.”

Jace smiled wide. “Wrong. It’s just getting funny. Do you know what the punch line will be? I hear they look like huge bears.”

“You’re a riot,” Mira said blandly.

“I’ll die laughing,” Jace said. “Go ahead, test me.”

Cole felt like the situation was out of control. “Mira, this is crazy. Let him have the last word. Who cares? We have too much to do, too much real danger to survive. If he wants the prize of biggest nut job, let him have it.”

Mira looked from Cole to Jace and back. The only sound was the gentle clomping of the walking brick. “No. He doesn’t have to always get his way.”

“I kind of do,” Jace said. “Want to know the secret? You don’t bluff.”

Cole thought Jace had been kidding before, but something about the way he said it made him really wonder. Of course, that was probably the point.

“Mira,” Cole repeated.

“Cole’s right,” Twitch murmured.

“And the grasshopper is back in the contest!” Jace cried.

Twitch glared, lips compressed, but said no more.

Bertram leaned forward. “Might want to stop speaking now. Up ahead is a stretch where talking could prove problematic.”

Everyone fell silent. Leaning out the window, Cole peered ahead. The path had mostly straightened. About a hundred yards forward on his side, partly obscured by lesser vegetation, he saw a soaring tree with a trunk wider than the autocoach. The path went right by it. He could glimpse others beyond.

“Big tree,” Cole said, pulling back into the compartment. “Really big tree.”

“Liam might just be messing with us,” Jace said. “You know, playing a joke on the new guys.”

“You know it’s serious,” Mira said.

“We’ll find out soon,” Jace said.

If Cole thought he could knock them unconscious, he would have. But Jace was bigger than him and already had his golden rope in hand. Cole considered getting out his Jumping Sword. He might need it when the bears showed up.

“Please, Mira,” Cole urged.

“All right,” she sighed, exasperated. “Fine. You win, Jace. Have your last word, and let’s live to get killed in a more surprising way.”

Jace’s grin widened. He held out a hand to Mira and nodded once.

“That’s it?” Mira asked.

Jace nodded again.

“You just wanted me to say that you could win,” Mira said.

Jace gave a slower nod and pointed at her.

“You’re so chivalrous,” she said dryly.

Jace shrugged.

Cole made a zipping motion over his lips and then buttoned them. The others nodded.

Cole watched as they passed the first big tree. The trunks only grew thicker after that one. The path continued to wind. Some of the trees looked wider than Cole’s house. The grooves in the bark were deep troughs. The path weaved a slalom course through the towering forest. Between the surreal trunks, fragile ferns grew among expanses of dark soil and mossy boulders. The colossal trees filtered the sunlight, transforming the world beneath their layers of unreachable limbs into a twilight realm.

The steady clomps of the walking brick provided the main sound. Faint clomping reached them from the trailing autocoaches. Despite the rough path that had grown weedy in places, the autocoach itself made little noise—a slight creak when they hit a bump was all. Otherwise the ride was surprisingly smooth and quiet, especially when Cole contrasted it against the jolting and rattling of his slave wagon.

The atmosphere under the trees felt close and silent, almost like all of nature had paused and was listening. Cole supposed it might feel that way because he knew about the giant bears.

As minutes passed, Cole relaxed enough to feel a small temptation to shout something. He tried to think what would be funny. “I win the contest!”

was up there, but his favorite was “Bears are wimps!” Of course, he said nothing. Aside from wanting to live, any loud noise in these imposing woods would feel out of place, like screaming in a church.

He thought about his Jumping Sword, wishing he had retrieved it when he had the chance. Although, technically, it was only talking that would trigger the bears, he didn’t want to risk the extra noise of digging through the storage compartment, just in case.

“Hello?” called a voice in the distance.

Cole looked across the coach at Mira. Her eyes were wide.

“Hello?” the voice called again. “Anyone?” It was a man, his voice muffled by the trees, like he might not be as far away as the first cry had sounded. What came to mind was some hunter or hiker who had lost his way.

Jace squeezed Cole’s arm and shook his head sharply. Twitch brought an urgent finger to his lips. Mira nodded, both hands over her mouth.

Cole knew they were right. This had to be a trick. And besides, if it was real, the guy had already sealed his fate.

“Please!” the voice called again, a bit fainter, as if heading away from them. “Help! Somebody!”

Soon the woods were silent again. Cole watched and listened, wondering if he might notice a sign of one of the giant bears. He knew it would freak him out if he saw one, but he couldn’t resist looking.

“Hello?” called a new person from the other side of the autocoach. This time it was a woman, her voice hoarse. “Anthony? Where are you? Say something!”

“I wanted to show my grandnephews some of the sights in Sambria,” Bertram said. “My grandniece as well. No laws against that I hope!”

Cole went rigid at his words. Bertram was a semblance, so he was free to talk, but the unexpected response startled him. Jace was covering a laugh. Cole remained too tense to find it funny.

“Is somebody there?” the hoarse woman called out. “Please! I’ve lost the road!”

Mira was shaking her head. They were all in agreement to keep silent.

“Please, answer me!” the woman called, her ragged voice dripping with despair.

“I’m afraid we’re just here on holiday,” Bertram said brightly. “I’m getting on in years—call it a last hoorah.”

“Please, help me! Someone! Anyone!”

“I’m not feeling my best today,” Bertram apologized. “Better stay coach bound, I’m afraid. Aging joints and what have you.”

The woman’s pleadings faded behind them.

The trees remained enormous. They heard a couple more people calling for help, different voices, one male and one female, lost souls roaming the forest. The distant cries were faint enough that Cole partly wondered if his ears were playing tricks on him.

Finally the trees began to diminish in size. They were still huge, but most of the trunks were now smaller than the autocoach, and none were as wide as a house. On Cole’s side, a deer ambled beside them, keeping pace. Cole watched the graceful creature, wondering how long its curiosity would last.

“Greetings,” the deer called to him in a male voice. “Are you good people lost?”

Cole watched the animal in stunned silence.

“Can you hear me?” the deer asked.

Cole looked at his companions. Twitch mimed buttoning his lips shut. Cole nodded.

“That isn’t a very safe road,” the deer called. “Where are you trying to go?”

Cole waved good-bye to the deer.

“Think you know these woods better than I do?” the deer asked, turning away. “Your funeral.”

“One and one makes two,” said a voice at the other side of the autococh. Cole swiveled to see another deer. “Two and two makes . . .”

His mind automatically answered “four.” But he kept his mouth shut.

“Row your boat, gently down the stream,” the deer recited. “Merrily, for life is but a . . .”

He could hardly believe the deer was so blatantly trying to get them to say something. Twitch shooed the deer away with his hand, and it bounded off.

The autococh rolled onward, and the trees continued to diminish until they resembled an ordinary forest. They passed a crossroads. Their autococh went straight, but behind them, one of the autocoches turned right; the other, left.

Cole and the others stayed silent for another long stretch. Finally Mira tapped Bertram and pantomimed talking.

“What’s the trouble, my dear girl?” Bertram said. “I’m sorry, you’ll have to speak up. My hearing isn’t what it once was.”

Leaning close to him, Mira whispered in his ear. Cole couldn't hear a word she said.

"Oh, yes, we're in the clear," Bertram replied. "Feel free to converse. After all, we're on holiday."

"That's a relief," Mira said.

"I was honestly ready for the two of you to get us killed back there," Twitch said. "I was set to fly away."

"Sometimes you have to stand up for what's right," Jace said.

Mira kicked at his shin from across the compartment. "You were like a spoiled kid who complained until he got the treat he wanted."

"What did that make you?" Jace asked, having twisted to avoid her foot.

"The adult who relented," Mira said.

"It worked out perfectly," Jace said. "I waited for you to give me what I wanted, but I let you be the nut job who got the last word."

Mira sprang out of her seat, crouching because of the coach's roof. She didn't kick him too hard, but this time it connected. Jace laughed along with the other boys.

Then Mango flew in the window and perched on Mira's shoulder. "Good, good," the bird approved. "You're having fun. I hate to spoil the mood, but we have company."

"What?" Mira asked, settling back in her seat, all playfulness gone.

"Legionnaires coming this way. On horseback. Lots of them."

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## ON THE RUN

“Legionnaires?” Cole exclaimed. “How many is lots?”

“One hundred and forty-four,” Mango said. “They’re west of us, coming this way in four equal groups, along four different routes.”

Jace yanked open the hatch to the compartment where their gear was stashed. He handed Mira her Jumping Sword, then Cole his bow and his sword.

“How’d they find us so quickly?” Twitch asked.

“They haven’t found you,” Mango replied. “They’ve fanned out over a broad area. They’re searching.”

“They might suspect we ran off this way,” Mira said. “Or they might just be checking everywhere. Either way, I guess they know we’re alive.”

“Like Declan warned us,” Cole reminded her. “Your father must be able to feel that you haven’t died. He must have told them.”

“What matters is what we do now,” Jace said, all business. “Mango, will they find us if we stay on our current path?”



Mango gently pecked at Mira's silver necklace while talking. "If they don't double back or change course, they'll overtake you before the end of the day."

"Can we go in other directions?" Mira asked.

"You could leave the autocoach," Mango said, nibbling at one of the pins in her hair. "They're sticking to the roads. But traveling cross-country on your own can be dangerous in Sambria, especially in a wild area like the north of the kingdom."

"We should stay with the coach until we know we're going to be found," Twitch said. "You can warn us when they get really close, right, Mango?"

"Yes, sirree," the bird replied.

"If they find an empty coach, they may heavily search the nearby area," Jace pointed out.

"I don't mean we should desert the coach a minute before they find us," Twitch clarified. "More like an hour before. The autocoach will travel a good distance before they find it, and we'll have time to get well away from the road."

"Good thinking," Cole approved.

"We want the autocoach as long as we can keep it," Mira said. "We'll be much slower on foot. And Mango is right. This part of Sambria is unsafe."

"Maybe we can use that to our advantage," Jace said. "Sort of like the cloudwall all over again. Is there anywhere we can go where the legionnaires won't want to follow? Someplace they would expect us to avoid? Especially if it's away from where they're headed."

Mango flapped her wings and gave a soft squawk. "There are plenty of dangerous places. The legionnaires are west of you, some moving northeast,

others southeast. Going west isn't an option right now, and I don't think you could get ahead of them cutting straight south. If you flee north, you'll end up back in the Quiet Wood, and eventually you'll get pinned against the Boomerang Forest. If you try to get around the Boomerang Forest to the east, you'll end up against the Brink."

"I don't mind the Quiet Wood," Jace said.

"But we don't want to get pinned with nowhere to run," Twitch said. "The Boomerang Wood is a dead end. With no skycraft, the Brink is too."

"For most of us," Mira said.

Twitch blushed. "We can talk about me later."

"The Brink continues east of the cloudwall?" Cole asked.

"Yes," Mira said. "The cloudwalls only mark off a portion of the Brink. The Boomerang Forest keeps people from looking behind the Eastern Cloudwall, just like the Briarlands keeps people away from the Western Cloudwall. But beyond the Boomerang Forest, the Brink keeps going. Floatstones don't work there, so having skycraft wouldn't matter."

"What else can we do, Mango?" Jace asked.

"You can run to the northeast," the cockatiel said. "That leads away from civilization and into some wild, dangerous territory. Plenty of places to get lost that way. Based on the current search pattern, they assume you're fleeing there."

Bertram cleared his throat noisily. "If they still want to reach Middlebranch and don't mind a risk, Brady's Wilderness would be an option."

"I've heard of that place," Jace said. "Isn't it trouble?"

“It’s in the right direction,” Mango said. “Mostly east, a little south. They won’t expect you to risk going that way and won’t be eager to chance it themselves. It has quite a reputation.”

“I’ve heard of it too,” Twitch said. “Seems like you only hear about the really bad places.”

“You don’t hear about the worst places,” Mira said. “Nobody makes it back to spread the rumor. Didn’t a shaper go nova there?”

“‘Go nova?’” Cole asked.

“All shapers worry about going nova,” Mira explained. “When gifted shapers overextend themselves, they can lose touch with what is real and what is a semblance. Greed or paranoia or insanity take over, and they shape uncontrollably, usually until they kill themselves in the process. Sometimes it leaves a big mess behind.”

“What do we know about this place?” Cole wondered.

Mira shrugged. “I haven’t heard much.”

“Little is known,” Mango said. “Story has it Brady was a young child who came here from outside. He had a lot of power and a child’s mind. He shaped vividly but without control. This happened about forty years ago, and there has been no word of him since.”

“A shaper that strong doesn’t just disappear,” Mira said. “He must have shaped something that killed him.”

“Have you been there, Mango?” Twitch asked.

“Just the borders,” Mango said. “People don’t go there, so I’ve never monitored the area.”

“Are there still roads?” Twitch inquired.

“Three roads,” Bertram said. Cole noticed that the old semblance spoke with more clarity and authority when travel routes were involved. “Hard to guess their state of repair. We can hope they’re passable. If so, it would prove a clever shortcut to Middlebranch.”

“The soldiers don’t seem to be headed that way?” Mira clarified.

“Not presently,” Mango said. “There is no guarantee they won’t change course.”

“If the nearest soldiers turn toward it, would we arrive before them?” Twitch checked.

“Probably,” Mango said. “Barely.”

“I say we go for it,” Jace said. “We can handle whatever some kid dreamed up.”

“The place has a reputation for a reason,” Twitch pointed out.

“And we’ve all survived some dicey sky castles,” Jace said. “I’m not saying it’ll be easy. But this is more our thing than fighting legionnaires. Think of it as a big castle.”

“I hate the castles,” Twitch said. “Why do you think I ran away?”

“You hate them,” Jace said, “but you survived them. We have better gear than ever. We’ll be working together. The legionnaires won’t follow us in, especially if they have no idea we’re in there.”

“We can’t let the legion find us,” Mira said. “What do you think, Cole?”

Cole paused before answering. He certainly didn’t want to head to deadly shaping grounds that might feel like a giant sky castle. But he wanted to get caught by the legionnaires even less. “Are there other options like Brady’s Wilderness?” Cole asked Mango.

“East of Cloudvale, the brink curves away more toward the north,” Mango said. “So you could go northeast or east. That seems to be where the soldiers are heading, probably because it’s the most sensible place to run. There are no decent hiding places that way unless you head off into the wild on foot. Even if you take the autocoach by the cleverest routes, if the legionnaires continue in that direction, they’ll overtake you by tomorrow.”

“It sounds like we should try the Brady place,” Cole said.

“I don’t love the idea,” Twitch said. “But I agree.”

“All right,” Mira said. “Bertram? Can you take us to Brady’s Wilderness?”

“Brady’s Wilderness,” Bertram said. “Then past there to Middlebranch, I gather?”

“Unless we’re forced to turn aside,” Mira said.

“I know how we’ll go,” Bertram said. “Let’s hope the roads have held together enough for us to pass.”

“I’ll keep scouting,” Mango said. “You’ll hear from me if we need to rethink our maneuvers.”

“Thanks, Mango,” Mira said as the bird leaped from her shoulder, wings flapping, and disappeared out the window.

“Didn’t take long for things to heat up,” Cole grumbled.

“Did you think those legionnaires would disappear?” Jace asked.

“I hoped they’d look in the wrong place,” Cole replied.

“It’s easier to check the right place when you look everywhere,” Twitch said.

They clomped along in silence for a moment. Cole glanced over at Twitch. “You never told us about the wings.”

“Oh yeah,” Jace agreed. “We have time now. You’re from Elloweer? One of the natives?”

“I guess the secret is out,” Twitch said with a nervous laugh. “I’m one of the grinaldi. People call us springers.”

“Never heard of you,” Jace said.

“Plenty of people don’t know about the grinaldi. We’re not numerous. We have wings, but we don’t fly for long distances. The wings are used to enhance our hopping.”

“How does the ring work?” Cole asked. “Did you bring it from Elloweer?”

“No,” Twitch said. “If I had the ring, I doubt I would have been taken as a slave. I found the ring in the supply room at Skyport and chose it as my special item. I’ve never had to use it until yesterday.”

“The ring shows his true form,” Jace explained.

“Why aren’t you always in your true form?” Cole asked.

“I sometimes forget that you’re new here,” Twitch said. “Elloweer is full of unusual beings. Some of them can’t leave Elloweer. They come up against a barrier. Others, like me, change to human form if they leave.”

“And the ring switches you back,” Cole said.

“Rings like this are rare,” Twitch said, holding it up. It was silver, with a strip of tiny blue gems all the way around. “They’re crafted by Ellowine enchanters. I’m not sure how one ended up at Skyport, but there it was, so I claimed it.”

Cole thought back to the slave wagons. “When the slavers were in my world taking my friends, one of them looked like a golden wolfman. I never saw him again.”

“One of the lupians,” Twitch said. “A warlike people. You don’t see many with golden fur. He must have reverted to his true form in your world.”

“Show us what you really look like,” Jace said. “I never got a good look.”

“Not when I was carrying you?” Twitch asked.

“My mind was on other things,” Jace said.

“Mira told us her secrets,” Twitch said. “We know where Cole comes from. But I don’t know much about you, Jace. Why don’t you tell us about your past, and then I’ll show you my true form.”

“Not much to tell,” Jace said with a slightly uncomfortable smile. “I’ve been a slave all my life. Never knew my parents. I hated being controlled, and nobody could break me. I still found ways to have fun. And I worked really hard at not working hard. Owners got sick of me. I was traded a couple of times, and finally they sold me to the Sky Raiders. Best thing that ever happened to me. I could finally live. It was dangerous, but I could do my own thing most of the time. Okay, let’s see your bug parts.”

Twitch rubbed his lips, one of his eyelids fluttering. “Thanks for putting it so delicately.” He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. “My wings ripped the old one,” he explained.

Twitch slid on his ring, and a pair of insectile antennae appeared high on his forehead. A quartet of translucent wings were now on his back, two on each side, like a dragonfly, but folded downward. Pulling up one pant leg, he revealed that his leg looked like it belonged to a giant grasshopper.

Cole flinched a little but tried to keep his expression composed. The bug legs were a little much.

“You’re knees are backward,” Jace said.

“From your anatomy, yes.” Twitch laughed. “But I can jump, like, twenty times higher. And I can kind of fly. Although I may not look it, I’m also quite a bit stronger.”

“Being human must feel so limiting,” Mira said.

“It does,” Twitch said, tapping his fingertips together in rapid succession. “It’s part of the reason I’m so careful. Picture if you were suddenly weaker and slower and your Jumping Sword was malfunctioning.”

“Were you a big risk taker back home?” Jace asked.

“I’m careful by nature,” Twitch clarified. “Among my people, it’s seen as a positive trait.”

“They sound really exciting,” Jace teased.

“We prefer quiet, happy lives,” Twitch said, taking off the ring. The wings and antennae vanished. “But we don’t always get what we want.” He started putting his shirt back on.

“What about you, Cole?” Jace asked. “What was your life like before coming here?”

“Easy. Compared to this, I mean. My parents took care of most things. We have a nice house. My sister thinks she’s awesome, but she’s not too bad, especially compared to slavers and scorpipedes. I went to school. I played sports.”

“Sounds like you were rich,” Jace said.

“I didn’t think so,” Cole said. “Maybe compared to some people. We were about average.”

“Did you ever get your hands dirty?” Jace asked. “Work in a mine? Or a field? Did you handle livestock? Build a house?”



“Nothing like that,” Cole said. “Mostly just school and sports and goofing off.”

“Rich must be average where you’re from,” Jace said. “Sign me up.”

“I’d love to,” Cole said. “Who knows if I’ll ever make it back there?”

“One step at a time,” Mira said. “Kind of like back at Skyport. First priority? Survive today. Second? Survive tomorrow.”

“How long until Brady’s Wilderness?” Twitch asked.

“Barring delays, we’ll arrive tomorrow morning,” Bertram said.

“Then I’m going to get comfortable,” Jace said, snuggling into his corner of the coach. “Wake me if something tries to kill us.”

## BRADY'S WILDERNESS

**C**hocolate chip cookies the size of hula hoops floating in a pond of milk gave Cole his first warning that something was out of the ordinary. He squinted out the window in the morning light. Bushes and small trees grew intermittently on the muddy bank beside the pond. Rocks and sticks littered the shore. Everything looked like a normal woodland pond except for the creamy white liquid and the huge, unmistakable chocolate chip cookies doubling as giant lily pads.

Twitch had curled up on the floor of the autocoach between the seats. Jace was wedged in his corner. Mira had her head on Bertram's lap. They all breathed like they were sleeping. The old semblance stared sedately out the window.

Cole had only dozed intermittently through the night. Despite the smooth ride, he had struggled to get comfortable sitting up. Mango had visited before sunrise to confirm that the legionnaires were veering north and south of them

—not into Brady’s Wilderness. Too anxious to sleep, Cole had stayed awake since the cockatiel’s visit, watching for trouble.

“Guys,” Cole said. “Check this out.”

Mira popped up as if she hadn’t been fully asleep. “What is it?”

Jace leaned forward blearily to look out Cole’s window, then promptly snapped more awake. “Are those cookies?”

“And milk,” Mira said.

Twitch sat up, stretching. Still on the floor, he was too low to see outside. “Everything all right?”

“Yep,” Cole said. “Just a cookies-and-milk pond.”

“I want one,” Jace said. “Stop the coach.”

“We have food,” Mira said.

“Dried meat and biscuits,” Jace said. “No cookies.”

“They’re probably stale,” Cole said. “The milk has to be spoiled.”

“It doesn’t smell spoiled,” Jace said. “This is shaping. The normal rules don’t always apply.”

“Could be a trap,” Mira said.

“I’m just the guy to spring it,” Jace said. “Remember that castle with the candy garden? Best day of my life.”

“We’re being chased,” Mira said.

“We haven’t stopped all night,” Jace replied. “The bird told us we’re ahead of them. It’s time for breakfast.”

“Okay,” Mira said. “Stop.”

The autocoach immediately responded.

“You’ll be careful?” she asked.

“I’ll dive blindfolded from the highest tree I can find.” He opened the door and hopped down, golden rope in hand. “You coming, Cole?”

Cole fumbled for his sword. “Sure.”

Mira placed a hand on his arm. “You don’t have to go.”

“Giant cookies,” Cole said by way of explanation as he jumped out of the carriage. It felt good to stretch. He buckled his sword belt.

“Come on,” Jace said, already marching off. “You keep watch while I lasso a snack.”

Cole hurried after him, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

At the edge of the milky pond, Jace crouched and cupped milk into one hand. “It’s cold.” He brought his hand to his lips. “Mmmm. Rich and creamy.”

Shaking the milk from his fingers, Jace stood and cast his rope out to the nearest cookie. The golden rope wrapped around the target multiple times. With a flick of his wrist, the rope yanked the oversized cookie out of the milk, but it broke apart, soggy remnants splashing down.

“Not very solid,” Jace said.

Cole knelt on a flat rock that slightly overhung the pond. Below, milk lapped against the stone and the muddy bank, yet the milk didn’t seem to have any dirt in it. He dipped a finger and found that Jace was right—it was quite cold.

Jace ensnared another cookie, then hauled it in slowly, bringing it to where Cole knelt. “Help me get it out.”

Cole reached underneath the cookie. Although the top was firm, the underside was mushy. Working together, Jace and Cole lifted it out of the

milk, Cole's hands sinking into the underside until reaching a more solid portion. Milk dripped down his wrists into his sleeves and onto his shoes. Holding his half of the sodden cookie required all his strength.

With their prize between them, Jace and Cole shuffled back to the autococh. Cole tried not to breathe too hard. His arms burned with the effort. Mira got out as they drew near.

"You're not bringing that in here," she said.

"Why not?" Jace asked.

"It's a gooey, drippy mess," Mira said. "We'll eat some out here."

"Break off pieces," Cole suggested.

Using two hands, Mira snapped off part of one of the edges. The chunk was too big to take a normal bite, but she gnawed at it. "Wow, this is good."

Twitch got out as well and snapped off a piece. His eyes lit up when he tried a bite.

"Get some for us," Jace said. "We're too busy holding it."

Mira set her piece aside and broke off two more.

"Should we chuck it?" Jace asked.

"You want any, Bertram?" Cole invited.

"No time to bother," the old man replied. "I'm just here on holiday with my grandniece and grandnephews."

Swinging their arms, Cole and Jace heaved the cookie sideways, and it whumped down, flattening a circle of tall grass. They accepted their hunks from Mira. "We should get moving," she said.

"They won't follow us in here," Jace said. "Nobody wants to do battle with milk and cookies."

They all climbed back into the coach. Cole found that the cookie tasted freshly baked, with a hint of warmth as if it had barely cooled. The soggy parts were extra good. He only had one chocolate chip in his piece, but it was bigger than his fist.

Cole chomped on his cookie as the coach rolled along. Eventually, his stomach started to protest. He worried that eating more would make him sick. "Anybody want the rest of mine?"

"I'm done," Jace said. "They're too messy to store." He tossed it out the window.

"Leaving a trail of cookie crumbs?" Twitch asked.

"They won't know we did it," Jace said.

The others chucked their pieces as well.

Cole watched out the window, looking for another cookie pond or anything else out of the ordinary. He didn't have to wait long. The next clearing they passed was full of upright dominoes, each bigger than a mattress, white with black markings. Hundreds of them formed a winding path, ready to fall if the first toppled.

"That is so tempting," Cole said. "I love knocking over dominoes."

"We can't stop for everything," Mira said. "One of these times it will be a trap."

"I can't believe somebody didn't tip them over a long time ago," Cole marveled.

"Maybe somebody did," Mira said. "They might stand back up on their own. Don't forget, these were shaped. Who knows what they can do?"

"Use the bow," Jace said. "Target practice."

“Right,” Cole replied, excited. Jace had returned the bow to the storage compartment last night. Lifting the hatch, he retrieved it and handed it over.

While pulling the string to his cheek, Cole felt the arrow appear. They had passed the first domino, but in a minute, he would have a clear shot at the last one. Once it was in full view, he released the arrow, which hit the target a little higher than where he had aimed it. The domino rocked backward and fell into the next, creating a clattering chain reaction. The dominoes fell fluidly, the motion snaking around the field until the last slapped down flat.

Everything seemed very quiet after the noise of the dominoes had stopped—until they heard some distant roars, long and low and savage. They all looked at one another.

“Maybe not the best idea to announce our presence,” Twitch said.

“The baddies will figure out we’re here either way,” Jace said.

“We wouldn’t want to try to sneak by them or anything,” Mira said.

“Sorry,” Cole said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“If we have to blame somebody,” Jace said, “the guy who shot the arrow is first in line.”

“I don’t want to place blame,” Mira said. “I just want to live. I vote we stay in the coach from now on.”

“I’ll second that,” Twitch spoke up.

“Thirded,” Cole said.

“I’m going to keep my options open,” Jace said.

“Majority rules,” Mira informed him.

Jace held up his wrist. “Doesn’t rule me. I’m free.”

Mira rolled her eyes. “I’m technically a princess. I could declare this a monarchy.”

“You’re even more technically a fugitive,” Jace pointed out. “No offense.”

“Whoa,” Cole said.

As they curved around the next bend, a cupcake the size of a hill came into view—vanilla cake with chocolate frosting. Everyone crammed to his side of the coach to have a good look.

“Rethinking your policies?” Jace asked.

“I’m still full from the cookie,” Mira said. “Besides, how do you even get started on something that big?”

“We’ll need mining equipment,” Cole said.

“Check out my side,” Twitch said.

Everyone went to the other side of the coach to stare at a lemon meringue pie as big as a circus tent. In front of the epic pie, s’mores the size of card tables were scattered among the wildflowers, oozing marshmallow from all sides.

“Journey over,” Jace said. “We’ve found our new home.”

“Do you see anybody else here?” Mira asked.

“Their loss,” Jace said.

“Free food everywhere,” Twitch said, “and not a person in sight. What does that tell you?”

“More for us?” Cole asked, earning a high-five from Jace.

“Very funny,” Mira said.

“We get it,” Jace said. “It’s too good to be true. There must be a catch. It’s just fun to joke around.”



“It might not even be a deliberate trap,” Mira said. “But the boy who made this place disappeared. Something went wrong here. People avoid it for a reason.”

They heard a faint banging up ahead. As the coach advanced, the sound grew louder.

“Are we about to learn the reason?” Cole asked.

“We should get ready,” Jace said, suddenly serious.

Cole put on his shawl and held his bow, fingers gently plucking the string. The volume of the pounding increased.

After passing through an orchard of gummy fruit and jelly beans, they found the source of the booming—an enormous red-and-black checkerboard with a rapid game in progress. Each checker was as wide as the street Cole lived on, and either slid or jumped to a new square when moved. The checkers moved on their own, and no side ever paused. Jumped checkers waited in stacks beside the board. As they watched, kings were made on both sides, and black soon won. Immediately the checkers returned to their starting positions, and a new game began.

“Those would squish you flat,” Twitch said.

“Not if you stay away from the board,” Jace said.

Out the window on his side, Cole saw a ten-story Ferris wheel turning briskly, all the cars empty. At one side of it, across a small stream, a herd of vacant bumper cars jostled with one another on a broad black surface. Beyond the two attractions, off in the trees, Cole glimpsed the top of a roller coaster.

“Look over here,” Cole said. “This place is awesome.”

“What are those?” Jace asked.

“A Ferris wheel and bumper cars,” Cole said. “Rides from my world. This kid had to come from Earth.”

The autocoach continued to trot along, the pace never changing. Cole continued to watch out the window. As bizarre as some of the sights were, the surrounding environment made them weirder. A hot-fudge waterfall crept down an otherwise normal rocky slope. Hamburgers the size of cars populated a brushy field beside thornbushes and boulders. A group of plastic action figures the size of real people posed within a grove of birch trees.

In many ways, Brady’s Wilderness felt like a crazy dream come true. So much of it was silly and impossible. If they weren’t being chased by legionnaires, if they weren’t trying to find Mira’s lost powers, and if this place had a safer reputation, they could have so much fun here.

Cole wondered if his lost friends were seeing sights like this. In Junction City, was Dalton encountering the equivalent of giant pies and fudge waterfalls? Was Jenna using something like a Jumping Sword or Jace’s rope? He hoped they were experiencing at least some good things to help make up for their new lives as slaves in a foreign world.

“More cookies and milk,” Mira said, peering out her window. “Whoever Brady was, the kid liked to eat.”

“Look at the different kinds,” Jace said.

Cole saw a creamy pond crowded with what were either oatmeal or maybe peanut butter cookies. Another contained chocolate cookies with white chips. A third featured huge pale cookies with cinnamon on top—probably snickerdoodles.

“Anybody want to go fishing again?” Jace asked. “We might kick ourselves tomorrow when all we have to eat is dried meat and biscuits.”

“I don’t trust this place,” Mira said. “Let’s keep survival the priority.”

“Why just survive when you can feast?” Jace pressed.

“I’m still stuffed,” Cole said. “They look good, but I doubt I could eat much.”

In the distance, they heard the rich call of a horn blowing, long and low, the note rising a little at the end.

“What was that?” Mira asked.

“Legionnaires?” Twitch guessed.

“Mango would have warned us,” Mira said.

“What if they got her?” Twitch suggested.

Another horn answered, closer this time. Two more sounded from different directions. Then a brassier instrument let out a blast.

“Was that a trumpet?” Cole asked.

“Look!” Twitch shouted, pointing.

Cole followed his finger to the milk pool with the snickerdoodles. Something was rising out of the milk near the edge of the pond, as if walking ashore from the depths. A dripping skull emerged, followed by shoulder bones, then the rib cage and the arm bones. The skeleton held a rusty shield in one hand and a corroded sword in the other. The pelvis rose above the surface of the milk, followed by the femurs. Very little tissue clung to the bones—mainly just some rotten tendons and ligaments at the joints. After leaving the pond, the skeleton jogged toward them, bones shiny with milk residue.

“What is that?” Cole said, his voice pitched higher than he had intended.

“That is why we listen to Mira,” Jace said.

“Look the other way,” Mira said.

Several skeletons jostled one another as they exited the woods on the other side of the road. The fastest moved at a trot. A couple walked. One was missing a leg and hopped along using a spear as a crutch. All had weapons—a few swords, a sledgehammer, a crowbar, a rock.

“Fun’s over,” Jace said.

Horns and trumpets blared ahead of them, behind them, and from off to the sides. In the distance, Cole heard the unmistakable squeal of bagpipes.

“This is an ambush,” Twitch said. “They waited for us to get in deep, then sprang the trap.”

“Looks that way,” Jace said. “At least they’re not too fast.”

Leaning his head out the window and looking back, Cole saw the skeletons struggling to keep up with the autocoach. All but two were slowly falling behind.

From off in the trees to their right, a bellowing roar overpowered the horns and trumpets. The ferocious challenge struck a primal chord within Cole that left him trembling.

Mango flew in through the window. “We’re in trouble. Skeletons are coming from all sides.”

“How many?” Mira asked.

“Hundreds,” the bird replied. “Thousands, maybe. Graveyards of them. They’re all heading toward you. And there are worse things—savage creatures

like nothing I've ever seen. You're going to have to abandon the autocoach. You'll be easy prey in here."

Cole's breathing had quickened. He could feel his heart pounding in his hands. Did he have what he needed? He had his sword, his shawl, and his jewel. He held the bow. Anything else? What about food?

Up ahead, the ground rumbled with monstrous footsteps. Leaning out and peering ahead, Cole saw a dozen skeletons running toward the front of the autocoach. A few wore mismatched Viking armor. A big skeleton in the front held a longsword in both hands and wore a horned helmet.

But the skeletons weren't responsible for the ground quaking.

Coming up behind the bony warriors lumbered a dull orange Stegosaurus with maroon markings. Although obviously made of plastic, it was roughly the size of a school bus. Jagged plates protruded along its spine, and the tail had four spikes. The stegosaurus roared, showing razor teeth. Weren't they herbivores? Apparently, not this one.

The enormous plastic dinosaur charged toward the autocoach, bowling over the Viking skeletons like bowling pins and crunching bones underfoot. Undistracted, the galloping beast maintained a head-on collision course with the trotting brick.

A mightier roar drowned out everything for a moment. Cole looked up to see a Tyrannosaurus rex bounding toward them down a long slope, coming from the side, its plastic reptilian mouth a thicket of cruel teeth.

A paralyzing terror overtook Cole. There was no time to think. No chance to react. His eyes darted between incoming threats. Skeletons converged from

everywhere. The two dinosaurs were seconds away. Dropping his bow, Cole squatted and braced for the impact.

## CHAPTER

## 27

# FRENZY

**“H**ey, brainless!” Jace yelled, seizing Cole’s arm. “Out! Now!”

Mira and Twitch had already abandoned the autocoach. Fumbling with his Jumping Sword, Cole let Jace drag him out the door opposite the T. rex. The nearest of a ragged mob of skeletons approached from only a few paces away. The instant his feet hit the ground, Cole drew his sword, pointed it toward a bare spot on a nearby slope, and shouted, “Away!”

He soared over the rattling gang of skeletons and fell onto his side into some tall brush beside a Neapolitan ice cream sandwich that was the length of a bed. He was near enough to feel the cold radiating from it despite the warmth of the sun. His heart still hammered, but he no longer felt paralyzed. Confined in the autocoach, he had felt doomed. But Jace had snapped him out of it. They would do what they had trained to do at times like this. They would run. And who knew? Maybe they would make it!

Looking back, Cole saw Mira pointing at the Tyrannosaurus. The Shaper’s Flail hurtled through the air, a tangle of sturdy chains and iron balls,

and wrapped around its legs. The gigantic plastic lizard pitched forward, carving a trench in the ground just shy of the road.

Having changed course, the stegosaurus now chased Twitch, who hopped ahead of it with tremendous leaps assisted by his wings. Jace made his way toward Mira, lashing skeletons with his golden rope and flinging them into one another.

A rustling behind Cole warned him just in time to dodge the downswing of an ax wielded by a skeleton in a conquistador's helmet. While the skeleton tried to pull the ax from the ground, Cole hacked off its head. Bony hands grasping, the headless conquistador staggered toward him, and Cole dashed away.

Mira recalled the Shaper's Flail and sent it into a vicious circle around herself and Jace. The whirling iron balls blasted bones into fragments, and the chains clotheslined dozens of skeletons, hurling them to the ground.

The skeletons near Cole had him surrounded. They approached in a shrinking circle, empty eye sockets devoid of emotion. About half had weapons—pickaxes, swords, and knives. One in a tattered apron held up a rectangular meat cleaver.

Noticing that as the skeletons closed on him, they opened up a lot of the area beyond, Cole patiently centered himself between them and let them get close. At the last moment, he pointed his sword above them and yelled, "Away!"

Something swiped his leg as he cleared the skeletons, tearing his pants and scratching his calf. He had pointed at a spot about ten feet in the air, some distance off to one side, and that was where he ended up. With nothing to



land on, he fell the extra ten feet and struck the ground hard, rolling to help absorb the brutal impact. Cole bounced and skidded through the brush, losing hold of his sword.

Shaken and sore, with the taste of dirt and blood in his mouth, Cole scrambled toward his fallen weapon. It was a hard reminder to only point the sword at solid landing areas. Then again, it was better than getting diced into skeleton chow.

Grabbing his sword, Cole staggered to his feet as an even greater number of skeletons swarmed him. His eyes found a giant slice of cheesecake near the limit of the sword's range. Without time to plan and hoping for the best, Cole extended the sword, cried the word, and sailed disturbingly high. Air rushed over him as the sword pulled him up and forward. An unusual vibration in the handle made Cole wonder if the sword was straining.

As he curved down toward the cheesecake, to his horror, Cole saw that he wouldn't quite make it. He had tried to stretch the leap too far. The result would be like jumping off a five-story building.

Hands scooped beneath his arms from behind, and suddenly he had an extra boost. Twitch landed behind him on the huge cheesecake, their legs plunging into the surface to their knees.

"Thanks," Cole said breathlessly, twisting to see his friend.

"Glad I could help," Twitch said. "We were heading for the same high ground."

With a good tug, Cole yanked one leg out of the cheesecake, almost losing his shoe in the process. Then he withdrew the other. He found that the

surface of the cheesecake was firm enough to support him if he stepped lightly.

They were about thirty feet up. Down below, the stegosaurus bit chunks out of the cheesecake and clubbed it with its tail. Skeletons approached and started scaling it, finger bones clawing eagerly.

Mira came bounding across the field below and sprang to the top of the cheesecake. Jace's rope fell into numerous loops at his feet, then uncoiled like a giant spring, propelling him to the top of the cheesecake as well.

"They don't care about the autocoach anymore," Mira noted.

Cole saw the trotting brick still on the road, disappearing into the trees. In the rush to leave the coach, he had left his bow inside.

"No fun for them without us in it," Jace said. He crouched and scooped up some cheesecake in his palm. "At least we get to try this." He took a bite. "Wow, not bad!"

Below, the Tyrannosaurus came raging over to the cheesecake. It wasn't tall enough to reach them, but it came close enough to make it scary. Roaring and snapping, it leaped in vicious frustration, scattering many of the climbing skeletons.

"Flail, attack," Mira said, pointing downward. The Shaper's Flail stormed by, battering skeletons away from the cheesecake wall with a spray of shattered bone.

"With the flail, maybe we can hold out up here," Cole said.

"Not for long," Twitch said. "See how the big lizard on four legs is chewing away the base? They'll tear the cheesecake out from under us."

“He’s right,” Mira said. “The flail doesn’t seem to hurt the huge lizards. It just knocks them down and scuffs them up a little.”

“They’re plastic dinosaurs,” Cole said. “Giant toys.”

“They seem really fun,” Mira said sarcastically.

“No,” Cole tried to explain. “Normally, they’re little and plastic, and kids make them attack other toys. These ones are the size of the real things.”

“Those are dinosaurs?” Jace asked. “I’ve never seen one. You have them in your world? You must be braver than I thought.”

“Had them,” Cole corrected. “They’re extinct. We only know about them from fossils. These are big toy versions. Which might be worse than the real thing. Actual dinosaurs had bones and could bleed.”

The cheesecake shuddered as the Tyrannosaurus stopped leaping upward and ripped directly into it, biting and clawing. The stegosaurus had burrowed partially out of sight, tunneling furiously into the base of the enormous slice.

Mango fluttered down and landed on Mira’s shoulder. “I found the route with the least enemies. At least for the moment. I’ll scout as we go. If you’re fast enough, I might be able to guide you out of here.”

“The bird is our best chance,” Jace said.

Cole looked down. Skeletal hordes besieged the cheesecake, backed by an endless flow of reinforcements. Horns and trumpets continued to blow. A Triceratops the size of a bulldozer was rumbling their way as well.

He didn’t want to go down among all those fearsome creatures. It was pandemonium. Anything could happen, almost all of it bad. Right now the battle felt paused. But if he sat still, the cheesecake would be eroded, and he’d be toast. Although a big part of him wanted to stay put, because it made the

monsters seem farther away, he also understood that their only chance was to keep running.

“You’re right,” Cole said.

“I agree,” Twitch added. “Mango’s our new best friend.”

Cole turned to Mira. “How good are the swords at jumping from a high place to a low place?”

“Not bad,” she said. “They’ll brake you at the end, like with any jump. Leaping down looks worse than jumping up, and kind of feels worse, but you’ll survive.”

“Skeletons!” Twitch shouted.

Several were scrambling over the top of the back of the cheesecake slice. Mira directed the flail at them and sent them flying, but more replaced them.

“Time to bail,” Jace said. “Mango?”

“Follow me,” the cockatiel said, flapping to the opposite side of the cheesecake from the dinosaurs and perching on the edge. “Looks good. Ready?”

“Go,” Mira ordered.

The bird took flight. Mira pointed her Jumping Sword at a downward angle, shouted the command word, and then whooshed toward a fairly empty clearing screened by trees.

Cole aimed his sword at the same destination. It felt like preparing to jump off a building, with nothing but his trust in the sword to assure him he could land it. But the cheesecake was shuddering, and more skeletons were reaching the top, so he shouted the command word and sprang.

Instead of falling straight down, the sword tugged him forward in a long, sloping descent. His legs brushed the treetops at the edge of the clearing, and he landed hard, skidding to his knees. Scabs earned on previous tumbles burst painfully.

Twitch landed near him, as did Jace, who swung down with his rope connected to tree branches. Mira pointed at Mango and jumped again, this time low and far. Cole imitated her jump and stumbled to a halt against a tree.

Skeletons dressed as pirates hustled his way. Some wore scarves on their skulls. One had a captain's hat and a peg leg from the knee down. Most were armed with knives and cutlasses.

Jace passed him, his rope ensnaring distant tree trunks, then shortening and carrying him along. Twitch buzzed by overhead. Cole extended his sword and jumped again, slicing along a narrow line between the trees.

Another jump and they reached a field filled with the most expansive playground equipment Cole had ever seen. The complicated arrangement of slides, ladders, tunnels, climbing walls, tire swings, poles, knotted ropes, trampolines, monkey bars, and balance beams would have filled a city block, and it had to be ten stories high, all linking together to form a soaring maze. It would be the ultimate setting for an epic game of tag, but skeletons trying to tag him to death would limit the fun.

Mira jumped high onto the playset, landing on a bouncy bridge made from rope and wood planks. The Shaper's Flail followed her unobtrusively. Cole joined her, grateful for the gentler landing that came with heading upward.

“Hey!” a voice called.

Cole whirled, surprised. The broad face of a freckled girl with auburn hair in braids poked out at him from the mouth of a tube slide. She looked a few years older than him, maybe fourteen or so.

“Who are you?” Mira asked.

“I can help,” the girl said. “But you have to come now.” She didn’t sound scared. If anything, she seemed a bit bossy.

“Who are you?” Mira repeated.

“It’s not a trick,” she said. “I’m Amanda, Brady’s sitter.”

“His babysitter?” Cole verified.

“Not actually,” Amanda said. “He modeled me after her. I helped protect him. I saw you getting chased and thought you could use a hand. The whole place will join the hunt soon.”

Twitch and Jace joined them, making the bridge sway and wobble.

“Who is this?” Jace asked.

“Brady’s babysitter,” Cole said.

“Now or never,” Amanda said, glancing out of the tube slide.

“She says she can help us,” Mira said.

“Only if you hurry,” Amanda said.

“Would you put on this shawl?” Cole asked, fingering the clasp at his throat.

“Why?” Amanda snorted. “What’s it going to do to me?”

Without a good answer, Cole shrugged.

Amanda huffed. “Not interested. I was just trying to do you a favor. The worst of them aren’t on your trail yet—the mud people, the Blind Ones, the

flying squid-faced monsters.”

“We’ll come,” Mira said.

Amanda started sliding.

“You sure?” Jace asked.

“Sure enough,” Mira said, swinging into the slide and disappearing. The Shaper’s Flail slithered in after her. Jace followed, then Twitch.

Mango darted over to Cole, alighting on a bar near him. “Where are you going?”

“I think we found help,” Cole said. “We’ll be back.”

## CHAPTER

# 28

## AMANDA

**N**ot wanting to get left behind, Cole slung himself into the slide. The metal tunnel circled down, down, down, until he emerged in an underground room lit by a naked blue bulb. The others were waiting for him.

“Electricity?” Cole asked, looking at the bulb.

“He faked it,” Amanda said. “The bulb doesn’t have wires. But it never goes out. This way.”

She led them through an obstacle course of cramped tunnels, funhouse mirrors, and pivoting panels. All of it was underground. She kept scolding them to go faster. Occasionally they would see where other slides from the playground above gave access. At last they reached a wide empty sandbox. Amanda stood in the corner and started sinking.

“Quicksand box,” she explained before her head disappeared.

Mira stepped forward, but Jace pushed ahead. “Let me check it out.”

He sank as quickly as Amanda. “I think it’s all right,” Jace said when he was down to his chest. “No pain. I can feel space beneath me.” The sand was



at his neck. Then his head was gone.

Mira went next, followed by Twitch. Cole heard clattering on the slides and in the tunnels behind him. It had to be skeletons.

He stepped onto the sand and started sinking steadily. The parts of his body beneath the surface experienced no wetness. By the time he was down to his waist, he could feel his feet poking through the bottom of the sand. Holding his breath as his face slid under, Cole endured the smothering sensation of sinking through grainy matter for a few seconds before he dropped into a new room, landing on a padded floor.

Cole tried to brush off his hair but was surprised to find no sand there.

“Don’t bother,” Twitch told him. “We came through clean.”

Gymnastics pads covered the floor and walls of the otherwise bare room. Light came from glowing cubes in the corners. A smooth square of sand in the ceiling showed how he had entered the room.

“Come on,” Amanda said, showing that one of the pads in the wall swiveled when pressed. “Stop wasting time.” They followed her through a maze of halls and secret doors until they reached a bright room full of couches, stuffed animals, and beanbag chairs. “We’re safe here.”

“Do you hide here all the time?” Mira asked.

“I move around,” Amanda said. “It gets boring without Brady.”

“What happened to him?” Jace wondered.

A flash of grief distorted Amanda’s features, but she shook it off. “They got him. He couldn’t stop making up bad guys. I tried to help him. He made me to help him.”

“How old was he?” Jace asked.

“Six,” Amanda said. “He was so good at making things here in Dreamland.”

“You think this is a dream?” Mira asked.

“He did,” Amanda said. “He said he got here by dreaming. He was always waiting to wake up. I thought he must be right until they got him and the dream kept going.”

“He was making real things,” Mira said. “We call it shaping. The living things are semblances and the nonliving are renderings.”

“Whatever,” Amanda said, apparently not too interested. “I’ve been here alone a long time. Nothing changes. I don’t get older. I can’t leave. I’ve tried. So I just hide out. I’ve learned how to survive pretty good. Much better than when Brady was with me.”

“Did he slow you down?” Cole asked.

“Not really,” Amanda said. “We would find ways to avoid the bad stuff he made, but then he’d dream up new creatures that were smarter or had new skills. He couldn’t help it. Once he was gone, the monsters stopped improving, and my job got easier.”

“Are there others like you here?” Mira asked. “Good semblances?”

“He made a few heroes, but they eventually got killed,” Amanda said. “They were too bold. There’s nobody left on my side. But it looked like you guys needed help, and he made me to watch over little kids.”

“We’re not little,” Jace protested, earning an elbow to his side from Twitch.

“Play along,” Twitch murmured softly.

“No kids think they’re little,” Amanda said. “I’m fifteen. That’s when you’re finally big.”

“Are we stuck here?” Mira asked.

“I am,” Amanda said. “I can’t cross the border of Dreamland. You guys aren’t. I’ll teach you a trick that’ll let you walk right out of here. But first: Anybody want some popcorn?”

“Some what now?” Twitch asked.

“Yes,” Cole said. “Popcorn is good.”

Amanda walked into a neighboring room. “You four came from outside Dreamland?”

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“What’s out there?”

“Other weird stuff,” Cole said.

Amanda returned with four bowls, two in her hands, two on her forearms. “You don’t think we’re part of a dream?”

“Feels that way sometimes,” Mira said. “Especially this place. But it’s all real.”

“Don’t all dream people think they’re real?” Amanda asked. “How can characters in a dream tell how real they are? Brady thought he was the dreamer. I couldn’t argue with him since he made me. He used lots of good details. I can remember what it was like to be awake, even though I’ve never woken. I started to wonder if he was dreaming inside of somebody else’s dream. That would make me a dream of a dream.”

“You’re hurting my brain,” Twitch said.

Amanda gave a brash laugh. "I know how you feel! Don't worry, if you think you're real, who am I to contradict you? I don't care how real you are. It's nice to find anyone that isn't trying to kill me."

"You mentioned we could walk out of here," Mira said. "Were you serious?"

Amanda narrowed her eyes. "You're not spies, are you? Did the bad guys send you to learn my secrets?"

"You said there haven't been new enemies here since Brady left," Cole reminded her.

"True," Amanda said. "After Brady left, this place stopped changing. Maybe you are real! The only other people who've come from outside were grown-ups. If they can't outsmart a dinosaur, that's their problem."

"How can we walk out of here?" Mira asked.

"Easy," Amanda said, leaving the room for a moment. She returned with plastic skeleton masks. "Wear these."

"Are you kidding?" Jace exclaimed. "They followed us when we were in our autocoach. That hid us way better than a mask!"

"If you're so smart, maybe I'm wrong," Amanda said. "Maybe these masks haven't worked perfectly for years and years."

"You're a semblance," Jace pointed out. "They probably don't chase you whether or not you have a mask."

"They didn't chase Bertram," Cole added.

"I don't know Bertram," Amanda said. "Maybe Brady didn't make him. Brady made me as a companion. His nightmares always chased me. They still chase me if I don't wear a mask. But when I have a mask on, they do nothing."

None of them. We came up with the idea right before the Blind Ones got Brady. He thought it would work, so it did. It's his Dreamland after all. And then he wasn't around to make any of the bad guys outsmart the trick."

"We just wear plastic skull masks and walk out of here?" Cole checked.

"Yep," Amanda said. "But first try some popcorn."



Cole emerged from the metal tunnel cautiously. Despite Amanda's assurances, it seemed ridiculous that anything would be fooled by him wearing a plastic skeleton mask and his regular clothes. Ready to dash back to the tube, he advanced cautiously, Jumping Sword in hand.

The tunnel had deposited him on ground level at the edge of the elaborate playground. Skeletons wandered around at random. No horns blew. The organization they had shown when converging earlier was gone. One skeleton wearing a shabby monk's robe came near enough for Cole to reach out and touch it. Cole held still, trying to look more casual than he felt. The skeleton walked right past him.

Mira, Jace, and Twitch joined Cole. Behind them, Amanda watched from the tunnel, a mask covering her face as well. After they had filled up on hot buttered popcorn and cool lemonade, she had assured them that they could do whatever they wanted, including talk, as long as they kept the masks on.

Mango swooped down and landed on Mira's shoulder. The cockatiel pecked gently at one of her hairpins. "Don't tell me those masks actually work!" the bird squawked.

“Looks that way,” Mira whispered. “We should be able to stroll out of here.”

Cole kept watching the skeletons. Mira’s conversation with Mango didn’t seem to attract any notice.

“I told Bertram to wait for us past the edge of Brady’s Wilderness,” Mira said. “Think you could guide us to him?”

“The road winds a lot,” Mango said. “If you use your renderings, I might be able to help you catch him before he gets there.”

Mira turned to Cole. “What do you think?”

He felt flattered that she consulted him. “We don’t want to be too conspicuous. It would be bad if moving fast made our masks come off.”

“Let’s stay on the ground unless we need to dodge a random dinosaur,” Twitch said. Amanda had warned that there was still the chance of getting in the way of a large monster through bad luck. Sometimes skeletons got squished by accident.

“Fine with me,” Jace said. “I still can’t believe we might survive this. I had every intention of getting away, but it would have been rough.”

“We’ll just walk,” Mira said.

“I’ll lead you,” the bird said, flying forward.

Cole walked along, sword in hand, watching the skeletons ignore him. Some skeletons wore the remains of burial wrappings. Some wore filthy military uniforms. Many wore nothing. Of those that wore nothing, some were more polished and in better repair than others. Most carried some sort of weapon.

The Shaper's Flail followed along behind them, links clinking softly. The skeletons paid it no attention.

They passed many wonders. A three-level carousel rotated to calliope music, ornate statues of horses pumping up and down on their brass poles. A herd of massive Brachiosaurs waded through swampy terrain, tearing long strands of string cheese off white trees. A banana split the height of an office building threw long shadows as chocolate syrup and caramel seeped down creamy slopes.

Cole didn't feel like talking. Neither did the others, apparently. They just followed Mango and tried to stay out of the paths of the aimless skeletons.

The cockatiel led them well. The only monsters they encountered were skeletons, which roamed in such ridiculous numbers that they were unavoidable. Plastic dinosaurs could occasionally be seen in the distance. Cole glimpsed far-off flying creatures a couple of times, and once he saw some shambling mounds moving across a remote field. Otherwise the long march was uneventful.

Late in the day, Cole tore a piece from a glazed doughnut that was larger than a tractor tire. The others claimed handfuls as well, carefully eating the morsels under their masks. None of the skeletons showed interest.

As the sun sank, they reconnected with a path and shortly came upon the autococh, waiting just off the path near a stream. Mask still in place, Mira led the way inside. Cole found his bow where he had left it.

"You kids shouldn't wander off like that," Bertram scolded warmly. "We have places to go. Still bound for Middlebranch?"

"Yes," Mira said.

“We’ll arrive late tomorrow morning,” Bertram said. “Off we go.”

The autocoach started rolling forward. They took off their masks. Body scraped and bruised, feet sore, eyes drooping, Cole found the coach much more comfortable than the night before.



## MIDDLEBRANCH

**M**iddlebranch was a larger town than Cole expected. The bustling community made him realize he hadn't seen a real town since coming to the Outskirts—just Skyport, Declan's hidden castle, and the empty country where the slave caravan had traveled.

The typical buildings in Middlebranch had stone foundations that stuck up above ground level to support wooden walls. Several main streets crisscrossed the town. Not including the outlying farms they had passed in the last hour before reaching the town, Middlebranch had dozens of buildings, maybe hundreds, some of them four stories tall.

They reached a stone-paved street featuring several mansions with gated grounds. Cole craned to view the impressive homes. The strangest one of them boasted many turrets and gables, and was partly constructed from glossy black stone, partly from bricks of various shades of blue, and partly from golden-hued wood. The end result was quirky and visually confusing, not helped by the spacious quartz fountain out front.

“Look at that crazy house,” Cole said.

“Probably belongs to the lead shaper,” Mira guessed. “Only shapers would build so eccentrically.”

“I kind of like it,” Twitch said. “It’s original.”

“Should we talk to the lead shaper?” Cole asked.

“Usually the lead shaper is tight with the local government,” Mira said. “That often equals being tight with my father. This street is probably all government officials. We should look for Gerta the herb woman. Bertram? Could you take us to the town’s main inn?”

“There are two of significant popularity,” Bertram replied.

“How about the one the local officials visit least often?” Mira said.

“That would be Spinner’s Lodge,” he said.

“Let’s go there,” Mira said.

Jace was rooting around in the storage space under his seat. He looked up, a brown sack in his hand. “This is full of ringers,” he said.

“They told us they gave us money,” Mira said.

“I remember,” Jace explained. “But this is full! Copper ringers, silver, gold, even platinum. We could buy a ranch and have money to spare. We could buy one of those mansions.”

“We have to be careful not to show it,” Mira said. “Nothing draws trouble quicker than flashing money around.”

Grinning, Jace started sliding simple rings of equal size onto one end of a leather cord. “I’m free and I have money.”

“That’s too much,” Mira scolded. “No gold. Certainly no platinum. Use mostly copper, and a couple silver if you must.”

“I won’t show it off,” Jace promised. “I just want an emergency fund. We already almost lost the coach once.”

“Your coins are rings?” Cole asked.

“Most people in the five kingdoms use ringers,” Mira said. “They’re officially called ringaroles. I guess it’s new to you. Ten coppers in a silver, five silvers in a gold, ten gold in a platinum. There are also copper bits, worth a quarter of a copper, and silver bits, worth half a silver. Those are smaller and square.”

“No bits in here,” Twitch said, adding ringers to his own cord.

“It’s against the law to shape ringers,” Mira said. “Some shapers are employed to check if ringers are authentic. My guess is Declan shaped these, and I suspect nobody would be able to tell.”

“I should grab some,” Cole said. “You know, in case of emergencies.”

“Don’t get caught with too much on you,” Mira warned. “They’ll think you robbed a money house.” She claimed a small handful and began threading a cord through them.

Cole took a short cord from the bag, loaded it with gold and platinum ringers, then tied it around his leg inside of his sock. Satisfied, he started loading a longer cord with mostly copper ringers to wear around his neck.

“You’ll jingle,” Twitch said.

“What?” Cole asked.

“The ringers on your leg will jingle,” Twitch said. “It won’t fool anyone.”

“How should I do it?” Cole asked.

“Use less and spread them out,” Twitch said. “A few ringers in one boot, a few in the other. A couple inside your belt. Use knots to separate some on a

cord and bind that around your leg.”

“What are you, a smuggler?” Cole asked.

“I’ve traveled,” Twitch said.

“Or you could sew some secret pockets,” Jace mentioned.

“You sew?” Cole asked.

Jace shrugged.

Cole untied his cord and started rearranging his ringers. He noticed an autocoach similar to theirs pass them heading the opposite direction.

“There’s the lodge, up on the left,” Mira said.

“Correct,” Bertram affirmed. “I’m afraid I’ll have to wait in the autocoach.”

“Wait,” Jace said. “I see something I need. I’ll catch up.” Before anyone could respond, he opened the door and jumped down from the moving coach.

“Want me to follow him?” Twitch asked.

“We have to trust one another,” Mira said. “He’s a big boy. He’ll stay out of trouble.”

“It’s his first real day of freedom with his pockets full of money,” Twitch reminded her.

Mira couldn’t quite hide a look of panic. “He has to get used to the idea at some point.”

The autocoach halted smoothly. “We have arrived,” Bertram said. “I’ll wait nearby.”

“Thanks,” Mira said, climbing out of the coach. Cole and Twitch followed.

Cole noticed people glancing at them. Down the street he saw another autococh, so they couldn't be too rare. Maybe the people weren't used to strangers. Or maybe it was because of their ages.

Spinner's Lodge contained a long, rectangular room full of plain wooden tables, all of them empty. A stone hearth on one end housed a large black kettle. Heavy beams spanned the space overhead. A hallway led farther back into the building, and a kitchen could be seen beyond the stone counter.

A bald man limped toward them as they entered. His crooked nose had probably been broken more than once. "What do you want?" he accused.

"Food," Mira said. "Did we come to the wrong place?"

"Can you pay?" the man questioned.

"We have plenty," Mira said.

"You don't mind showing me?" the man asked.

Sighing, Mira pulled her necklace out of her shirt so he could see the copper rings. He gave a nod. "I don't know your faces."

"We're traveling with our uncle," Mira said.

"These boys don't speak?" the man asked.

"Not before lunch," Cole said.

"Pick a table," the man said. "You're early for lunch, late for breakfast. Must be nice to have no responsibilities. What do you want?"

"What's cooking?" Mira asked.

"Egg soup, skewers of chicken, bread, potatoes, bacon, pork chops, and some porridge from this morning. Cook's specialty is sugarbread. He has frosted and apricot today."

"How's the egg soup?" Mira asked.

“Exactly like it sounds,” the man huffed.

Cole noticed the bondmark on his wrist. The man certainly wasn't trying to make friends. Maybe he felt like kids were the only people he could treat rudely.

“Some of the soup for me,” Mira said.

“Me too,” Twitch chimed in. “And chicken skewers.”

“I'll have the skewers and bacon,” Cole said.

“How am I supposed to skewer bacon?” the man replied.

“The chicken skewers,” Cole said slowly. “And bacon.”

The man started walking away. “Will, you filthy weakling, get water to these customers.”

A thin boy a couple of years younger than Cole hurried over to the table with a platter of cups and a wooden pitcher. He had a bondmark as well. He filled three cups, distributed them, then scuttled back to the kitchen.

“Is everyone this rude here?” Cole asked.

“Depends on the town,” Twitch said. “Depends on the establishment. Depends who you are. Doesn't help when you're young.”

“Where I come from, people treat customers nicely,” Cole said. “They want your business.”

“It can be like that here, too,” Mira said. “We're in a remote town. Not many options.”

Jace walked into the room wearing a felt top hat, gray with a black band. It wasn't very tall, but it had a brim all the way around.

Mira buried her face in her hands.

Jace came over to the table, grinning wide. “Saw it in the window.”

“It’s . . . something,” Cole said.

“Isn’t it?” Jace said. “I mean, what’s such an amazing hat doing in a place like this?”

“How much?” Mira asked.

“Two silver,” Jace said.

Mira reddened, her lips pressed together.

“I’ve never bought anything before,” Jace whispered proudly to Cole.

“What’s for lunch?”

“They have chicken, pork, and egg soup,” Twitch listed. “And sugarbread.”

“Sugarbread?” Jace asked, perking up. “Any flavors?”

“Apricot and frosted.”

“I know what I’m getting,” Jace said.

The young slave called Will returned with two bowls on a platter. He placed one in front of Mira, the other in front of Twitch.

“You blundering good-for-nothing!” the bald slave yelled, exiting from the kitchen. He hobbled up to Will and cuffed him on the ear. “I gave you bread! Where’s the bread?”

Will looked scared. “I must have set it down in the kitchen.”

The bald slave cuffed him again. “Don’t write me a speech. Fetch it!”

Will scurried off.

Hands on his hips, the bald slave turned to face the table. “You’ve picked up a tagalong. Quite the gentleman, it appears.” The sarcasm was apparent.

Jace looked at him hard. “Ever buy a hat, bald man?”

The man squared up and stared at him flatly. “If I ever bought a hat, I’d have an outfit to match it.”

“Then you’d buy a rag,” Jace replied without humor. “But it wouldn’t hide that nose or your mark. Who taught you to talk back to your betters?”

The man glared, fuming. “You better watch yourself—”

“I better watch myself?” Jace laughed, standing up. “You’re a slave, you dimwit! You keep opening your mouth with no idea who you’re talking to!”

Cole tried to signal Jace to mellow out, but there was no reaching him. He had his game face on.

Jace took off his hat, turned it upside down, and dumped Twitch’s soup into it. “I bought this as a joke.” He walked up to the slave and, reaching up to the taller man, put it on his bald head. Oily soup cascaded down the man’s neck and shoulders. “It’s yours now.”

Veins stood out in the man’s neck. His fists were tensed, his gaze lethal.

“Are you giving me the eye?” Jace growled. “You’ve forgotten yourself, lowlife! Please hit me. I’d love to watch you swinging by the neck, that goofy hat on your ugly head.”

The slave backed away, his expression less certain. Jace stepped forward and snatched his hat back. “You should be on your knees, begging forgiveness. I’ve had enough. Fetch your owner! We’re going to have words.”

The bald man hesitated, as if about to reply.

“How stupid are you?” Jace yelled. “You’ve wrecked our meal! Move!”

The bald man hurried away. Cole avoided eye contact with Jace. The bald slave had been a jerk, but Jace had laid into him too much. Cole’s only relief was to have Jace’s temper directed at a target besides himself.



A moment later a short man came out from the back. "What's the trouble?"

"Do you own Baldy?" Jace asked.

"I own him and this lodge," the man said.

"Your slave kept mouthing off," Jace said. "It was unacceptable."

The short man wrung his hands. "Gordon doesn't always . . . That's just his way."

"He shouldn't deal with people," Jace said.

"Maybe not." The man sighed. "I'll reprimand him."

"Okay," Jace said, straightening his shirt self-consciously.

"Let me make it up to you," the man said. "How about some frosted sugarbread? Just made it this morning."

"That's actually what I was going to order," Jace said, returning to his seat. "I'd like that."

"Four slices, on the house," the man said. "Sorry for any trouble. Would you like me to wait on you personally?"

"The other slave is fine," Jace said. "Will. And my friend needs more soup. Baldy made off with his portion."

"Of course," the owner said. "I'll see to it." He retreated to the kitchen.

"You have a way with people," Cole said.

Twitch coughed, perhaps covering a laugh.

"What?" Jace asked innocently. "I know how slaves are supposed to act. I went easy on him!" He lowered his voice. "If I had ever treated a free man that way, I would have gotten ten lashes!"

"Did you have to dump the soup?" Cole asked.

“I sure did,” Jace said, looking regretfully at his hat. “You saw how he treated that kid. I know his type. Rotten to the core. I’ve worked under guys like him. A bad slave can be worse than a bad owner. He had it coming.”

“You ruined your hat,” Mira said.

“Maybe I can clean it,” Jace said. He lowered his voice again. “It’s the first thing I ever bought. Slaves take what we’re given. We can’t purchase anything. The hat was perfect. Something nobody would have given me. Made me sad to ruin it.”

Will emerged from the kitchen. He gave everyone a small loaf of dark bread and a slice of sugarbread, then placed a new bowl of soup in front of Twitch. Cole thought the sugar-bread looked kind of like a cinnamon roll.

“Thanks, Will,” Jace said. “Have you ever tried sugarbread?”

Will smiled and gave a nervous chuckle. “No, sir. It’s expensive. It’s not for the help.”

“There was a time when I’d never tried sugarbread,” Jace said. “I thought it looked really good. But my . . . mother wouldn’t let me try any.” He took a bite, briefly closing his eyes as he chewed it. “It’s delicious. I want you to have half of mine.”

Will glanced toward the kitchen. “I couldn’t.”

“You have to,” Jace said, tearing his piece of sugarbread in half and holding out the larger piece. “Otherwise I’ll complain. It’s an order. Cram it in.”

After another glance back at the kitchen, Will took a bite. His eyes lit up. “I’d always wondered how it tasted,” he said.

“Good, right?” Jace asked, munching his own piece.

“Amazing,” Will said, gleefully taking more bites. “I almost pinched some once. It just smelled so good. Tastes even better. Thanks.” He stuffed the rest into his mouth, rubbed his lips, then wiped his hands on his apron.

“Well done,” Jace approved. “You’d better get back to the kitchen.”

“Thanks so much,” Will said before hurrying away.

“Is that your first sugarbread?” Mira whispered.

“You guessed it,” Jace said, finishing his piece. “Freedom is delicious.”

Will returned with a bunch of skewered chicken and a plate of bacon. He placed chicken in front of Cole, Twitch, and Jace. “I told Mr. Dunford we should give you some chicken,” Will confided to Jace.

“You’re the best,” Jace said.

“Will,” Mira said. “My cousin has a rash. We’ve heard of a woman in town who is good with herbs.”

“The herb woman?” Will asked. “Sure, she lives in a cottage on the far side of the bridge. Folks say she’s the best.”

“Thanks, Will,” Mira said. “We’ll probably pay her a visit.”

## CHAPTER

# 30

## HERBS

**C**ole felt relieved as he climbed back into the autocoach. He had worried that more drama might arise from the humiliated slave, but at the end of the meal, Mira settled up with Mr. Dunford, and the owner offered a final apology as they walked out.

“After going over the bridge, turn left down the first lane we reach,” Mira said to Bertram, repeating directions Will had shared. “We’re looking for a cottage with a walled garden.”

The autocoach rolled forward.

Mira turned to Jace. “If you want to keep traveling with me, you have to fix your attitude.”

“Me?” Jace exclaimed. “That guy was a jerk!”

“You started unnecessary trouble,” Mira said. “We’re lucky the owner sided with us. Mistreating another man’s slave can be taken as a personal insult. Mr. Dunford didn’t know who was outside in the autocoach. He

didn't want to risk crossing somebody important. Otherwise things might have gone the other way."

"The slave was way out of line," Jace maintained.

"He made some rude comments," Mira said. "Have some empathy. The man probably hates his job. He wasn't excited to wait on four spoiled kids on holiday."

"Don't forget, I was a slave," Jace said. "I know how it works. They don't get to treat us like that. Ever. And it wasn't just us. You saw him abusing Will."

"I get that you had reasons," Mira said. "But just because you *can* punish somebody doesn't always mean you *should*. Have some restraint. Show some class."

Jace scowled. "What's classy about letting people trample all over you? Letting them act like bullies? You guys are lucky to have somebody along with a backbone!"

"You have courage," Mira said. "I question your judgment. We don't want to lose the war because of needless battles. Show some patience. Don't stir things up out of vanity. Use your experience as a slave to make you more lenient, not harsher."

Jace exhaled angrily. "I can't believe a princess is lecturing me on what I should learn from being a slave."

"I was marked as a slave long before you were born," Mira said. "It's been my cover for more than sixty years."

"Exactly," Jace said. "Your *cover*. You knew it was an act. You had people looking out for you. I get it was hard. It wasn't palaces and parties. But don't

tell me what I should learn from my life. You don't survive by acting weak. That makes you a victim."

The confrontation was making Cole uneasy. It felt like he was eavesdropping. He certainly wanted to stay out of it. Twitch seemed equally uncomfortable. Trying to appear disinterested, Cole watched out the window as the auto-coach crossed a wide channel on a sturdy stone bridge.

"What if it went the other way in there?" Mira asked.

"I had my rope," Jace said.

"So we solve the problem with violence," Mira said. "If you used the rope to beat them up, how fast would the story spread? Not a very big town. My guess is minutes. How soon before the legion hears about a kid using a golden rope to trash an inn? How soon before hundreds of horsemen get a second chance to corner us? And why? Because you couldn't handle some miserable slave making fun of your hat."

Jace folded his arms across his chest and glared at her crossly. He almost said something once, twice, then kept his mouth shut.

"Yes?" Mira asked.

"You might have a point," he allowed grumpily.

"I've been hiding for decades," Mira said. "That doesn't work if you attract attention. You had your reasons for how you acted. You're right that the guy kind of had it coming. I'm asking you to be smarter than that."

"You want me to let people treat us like dirt?" Jace spat.

"Don't let others control you," Mira said. "Don't let them prod you into making stupid moves. Let them have the meaningless victories. Let that stuff go. Think bigger. Play to win."

“Never stick my neck out,” Jace said as if making a mental note. “Fine, we’ll see how that goes.”

Mira shook her head. “Don’t deliberately misunderstand. When it matters, go all in, fight to the finish. Just not when it doesn’t matter and could mess up what you want most.”

“What if I most want my self-respect?” Jace shot back. “What if that’s the most precious thing I have? What if, without that, I wouldn’t be a guy who could stick his neck out when it mattered?”

“How others treat you doesn’t have to hurt your self-respect,” Mira said. “Forgiving some poor guy who didn’t know who he was messing with doesn’t have to hurt your self-respect. Neither does being smart. Neither does playing to win.”

Jace chuckled cynically. “You were definitely born to rule. You know everything I should do. You even know how I should feel. You don’t want friends, Mira, you want semblances. Guess what? I’m not a puppet. And I’m not stupid. Maybe I thought sticking it to Baldy would make us look like we really were rich kids on holiday. Maybe that’s why the owner treated us so well. Maybe the rest of you looked like imposters because you let some mouthy slave act like your superior.”

Mira hesitated, finally shrugging. “Maybe. It felt unnecessary to me.”

“Fine,” Jace said. “I get it. I’ll try to pick the right battles. But I also need to follow my instincts. I’m good at surviving too, Mira. Without any help.”

“That’s fair,” Mira said. “But I’ll part ways with you if I feel you’re endangering me. Not out of meanness. Out of self-preservation. I don’t want to control you, Jace. But I have every right to control my own fate.”

Having crossed the waterway, the autocoach took the next left. They seemed to be heading out of town. The lane wasn't paved, and homes were becoming infrequent.

"I see a wall up ahead," Cole said, hoping to change the subject.

"Good work, Cole," Jace muttered. "If I'm gone, at least you'll have an expert wall spotter."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cole asked.

"It means, what's your opinion?" Jace said. "It's easy to let Mira do all the talking. Should I have left Baldy alone? Did I make a mistake? You didn't back me up at the lodge. You just sat there looking awkward. I know what Twitch was thinking. He was figuring out which window would offer the quickest escape. That's what he does. Maybe it's a bug thing. But what about you?"

"I thought you crossed the line," Cole said. "Pouring the soup on him was too much. It could have started a real fight."

"I couldn't show weakness," Jace said. "If I was going to stand up to him, I had to go for the throat. How would you have handled it?"

Cole sighed. "You saw how I handled it."

"You would have taken it?" Jace asked.

"Yeah, until Baldy crossed the line, I would have taken it. I did take it."

The autocoach came to a halt. "Would you like to investigate whether this is the desired destination?" Bertram asked.

"In a second," Jace said, sizing up Cole. "Twitch can spot the exits. Cole can take the insults. I'll keep us alive."



“Cole has saved my life more than once,” Mira said, fire in her tone. “Not just the cyclops. Remember when he came into the common room with his bow? That was the time to act.”

“I didn’t see any arrows in the legionnaires running to get you,” Jace said. “I forget, who took them out?”

“I’m not saying you didn’t help,” Mira said. “I’m saying Cole came to my rescue first. Don’t insult the only people on your side. You could learn a lot from Cole.”

Cole cringed inside. He knew Mira was trying to help, just as he knew she was making it worse.

“Good to know,” Jace said. “I was wondering who I could study for some pointers.”

“One of my secrets is watching for walls,” Cole said, trying to lighten the mood.

Jace smiled knowingly. “Another is staying in the auto-coach when it’s about to be destroyed.”

The truth of it felt like a stab to the gut. “You’re right. I froze.”

“It happens,” Jace said. “Usually it gets you killed.”

“Stop it!” Mira said. “Seriously.”

“It’s okay,” Cole said, angry now. Obviously, Jace didn’t want to pull any punches. “Jace probably saved my life back there. He can teach me a lot. What’s your secret? Practice? Reflexes? True love?”

Jace looked so stunned and terrified that Cole almost regretted the words. Almost.

Twitch laughed really hard. “You guys are hilarious!” Cole could tell it was forced. “We’ve come a really long way to talk to this herb lady. We’re outside her door. And all we can do is squabble.”

“He has a point,” Mira said.

“Of course I do!” Twitch said. “I’m part bug. We have instincts about these things. We all have plenty to think about. If we keep talking, it’ll just get mean. Let’s go see what we can learn.”

“Fine with me,” Jace said. Only a little worry lingered in his glance at Cole. “I’ve never been more bored.”

Cole wanted to get in one more dig, but resisted. “Let me see if I have this straight. When dinosaurs attack the coach, don’t stay inside.”

Jace smirked. “That’s the idea. And I’m not supposed to dump soup on people unless it’s absolutely necessary.” He opened the door and got out of the coach.

“We all learned something,” Twitch said, following.

“Like not to mock Cole,” Mira said privately, with a little smile.

Cole thought she had missed his reference to Jace’s feelings. The ease of her comment hinted she was aware of his crush. It took everything he had to erase his smile as he stepped down from the autocoach.

A wall of fitted stones draped with ivy blocked any view of the cottage until they reached a wrought-iron gate. Testing it, Mira found the gate unlocked. A gravel path bordered by white pebbles led from the gate to a tidy wooden cottage. To either side of the path, plants grew in rich soil, occasionally divided by lesser paths and weathered wooden beams.

Elaborate carvings of vines and birds were embossed on the door. Mira knocked firmly.

“I’m out,” a female voice called from inside.

“We have to talk,” Mira replied.

There came a pause. They heard a bolt slide back and the door opened. An older woman with short, graying hair opened the door halfway. She was quite thin and not much taller than Jace. “Children? I’m out of sweetroot.”

“We don’t want sweetroot,” Mira said.

“Speak for yourself,” Jace grumbled.

“What is it, then?” the woman asked. “Father have a fever? Mother sprain an ankle? Cow not giving milk?”

“You’re Gerta?” Mira asked.

“The crazy old herb woman,” she replied with a small curtsy.

“Declan sent us,” Mira said quietly.

Gerta looked beyond them, surveying the area. “Who’s in the coach?”

“A semblance,” Mira said.

“You’re serious,” Gerta said, opening the door wider. “Come inside.”

She guided them to a parlor with some fancy chairs and many shelves of fragile ceramic figurines. Jace claimed one chair, Twitch another. Cole and Mira used the sofa, reserving the biggest armchair for Gerta.

The herb woman used the armrests and sat down with a weary sigh. “Where is Declan?”

“We can’t tell,” Mira said. “It’s for your good as much as his.”

She smiled, showing imperfect teeth. “You were with him all right. He’s well?”

“Old,” Mira said.

“He was old when I was a girl,” Gerta said.

“He doesn’t get around so well anymore,” Mira said.

Gerta nodded. “He sent you to me for a purpose?”

“I’m looking for . . .,” Mira began, then seemed unsure how to phrase it.

“A monster that has been tearing apart Sambria,” Cole jumped in. “A really powerful semblance.”

“You can’t mean Carnag,” Gerta said with a gasp.

“That’s what people call it,” Mira said.

“There have been no eyewitnesses,” Gerta said. “I’ve heard tales of the devastation. The ruined towns, the missing people. We’re all worried it’ll head this way.”

“Is it close?” Mira asked.

“Don’t act eager, child. I’ve felt its energy from afar. It’s like nothing we’ve ever known. What does Declan expect you to do?”

“We have to find it,” Mira said.

“No,” Gerta said. “You leave Carnag alone. Try not to let it find you. What did Declan tell you about it?”

“We have to find it,” Mira repeated.

Gerta squinted at Mira. Then her eyes widened. “You’re connected.”

“What?” Mira asked.

Gerta spoke slowly. “You’re connected to Carnag. I wouldn’t have seen if I wasn’t really looking. Same type of energy, much fainter, but pure.”

“Where should we look?” Mira asked.

“Carnag moves erratically,” Gerta said. “This whole region of Sambria has been in awful suspense. We never know where it will strike next. Head southeast. Follow the screaming.”

“Straight southeast?” Mira asked.

“More or less,” Gerta said. “There will be a path of destruction. Ask the people fleeing. I expect you’ll find Carnag sooner than you’d like. What can you possibly hope to accomplish?”

“We probably shouldn’t tell you,” Mira said.

“That might be sensible,” Gerta agreed. “Declan really sent you to me?”

“Really,” Mira said.

“Did he shape the semblance in the autocoach?” Gerta asked.

“Yes,” Mira said.

“Mind if I have a look?” Gerta asked. “It’s not that I doubt you, but times being what they are . . .”

“Feel free,” Mira said.

“I’ll be back,” Gerta announced.

Cole and the others watched from the window.

“Think she’ll try to take something?” Jace asked.

“From the autocoach?” Mira said. “No, but it doesn’t hurt to watch.”

Gerta didn’t spend long at the coach. She returned along the path wearing a small, satisfied smile.

“That’s his work all right,” Gerta said as she reentered the room. “Bertram is a funny old character. He’s very adamant that he’s enjoying the countryside with his grandniece and grandnephews. You poor dears. You’ve gotten tangled up in something frightful. The whole garrison of legionnaires at

Bellum went to fight this thing. Over a hundred men. None returned. If you go bother Carnag, I'm afraid that will be the end of you."

"We have to try," Mira said.

"Your connection to the entity is undeniable," Gerta said. "I could speculate . . . but I better not. I'm glad to hear Declan survives. I'm happy to lend what aid I can. I've devoted myself to working with my plants. Vegetation is much easier to shape successfully than animals or even semblances. Given time, I might be able to whip up something powerful. Since you seem to be in a hurry, I'll give you some of the best of what I have on hand."

"That's not necessary," Mira said.

"I help Sambria little enough," Gerta said. "I spend most of my time here shaping herbs. I avoid the ugly politics. Nobody wants to antagonize the woman who can help a toothache and cure an upset stomach. Every now and then I get a chance to help people who are still trying to make a real difference for Sambria. I suspect you four fall into that category."

"We'd appreciate anything you can do," Cole said.

"I have single carrots that will fill your stomachs for three days," Gerta said. "Not an illusion, mind you. It will be like you've eaten healthy meals throughout. I have pumpkin seeds that will give you extraordinary night vision. The effect lasts four or five hours. You wouldn't want the extra sensitivity during the day, so eat them with care. And I have many herbal remedies for injuries and illnesses. I'll provide a full assortment. I'll even throw in a delicious tea that can induce prolonged slumber."

"You're too kind," Mira said.

“It’s the least I can do for friends of Declan,” Gerta said. “Would you four like to stay the night here?”

“We should be on our way,” Mira said. “There are people after us.”

“At least rest from your troubles while I gather my gifts,” Gerta said. “I’ll bring you some snacks shortly.”

“She’s nice,” Cole said after she had left the room.

Mira sighed. “Yes. And informed. The problem is, the more I learn about my powers, the less I want them back.”

“Maybe we really should go on vacation,” Cole said. “We have money. I bet Bertram would be thrilled.”

They all chuckled.

“I wish I could,” Mira said. “I really do. You all don’t have to join me. But I must face this.”

“We’re with you,” Jace said.

Mira gazed out the window. “I hope it doesn’t mean we’ll all go down together.”

## CHAPTER

# 31

## DEVASTATION

The autocoach clomped southeast through the night and into the next day, pausing only to let the occupants get out and freshen up. They passed through pleasant country made up of sparse forests, open fields, meandering streams, and low hills.

Around midday, they spotted a wagon pulled by horses coming along the road from the opposite direction. The wagon slowed to a stop as they approached, and Mira ordered the autocoach to halt. They ended up side by side.

“Good day,” said the driver, a big man with simple clothes and a straw hat. “Are you folks certain you want to head this way?”

“I’m on holiday with my grandniece and grandnephews,” Bertram said, leaning forward to be seen. “We’re out enjoying the countryside.”

The driver squinted back the way he had come. “This may not be the right direction to go for pleasure. The whole area is clearing out. Carnag has been active, and reports have him coming this way.”



“We’ll turn northeast before long,” Mira said.

“You know your affairs,” the man said. “The monster is hard to predict. Comes and goes. But I suggest you choose a new direction sooner rather than later. The towns you’ll reach down this road won’t have their normal services. Springdale got hit hard, and now the whole region is evacuating. Not many are coming northwest like me, since Carnag has shown a recent preference for this direction. You’ll pass many refugees when you head northeast.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Mira said. “I’m sorry for your troubles.”

“Are you sure you won’t just turn around?” the driver asked. “You’re tempting fate going southeast.”

“It’s no crime to see some sights with your relatives,” Bertram said.

The driver raised his eyebrows.

“Uncle is kind of a thrill seeker,” Cole apologized. “We’ll turn up the next good road.”

“Just offering a neighborly warning,” the driver said, shaking his reins. “Take care.”

“Thanks,” Cole said. “Travel safe.”

The next day they passed through an empty town. The area seemed like an abandoned movie set. There was no visible damage to any of the buildings. A few roosters roamed the streets, strutting and pecking.

The silent town drew Cole’s attention to the quietness of the road. The broad lane looked well traveled, but they passed nobody—no autocoaches, no wagons, no horsemen, no one on foot. Uninhabited farms went by on either side. After nightfall, they rolled through another derelict town. No lit

windows brightened the darkness. Some cows roamed a fenced field, munching the long grass.

The abandoned countryside heightened Cole's tension. People didn't pick up and clear out like this for a minor annoyance. Carnag had panicked the whole area. The possibility that the monster might come their way had convinced people to leave their homes behind and head for the hills.

On the evening of the third day since leaving Middlebranch, with the setting sun coloring the horizon lava red, they reached another town. Upon arrival, Mira called for the autocoach to halt, and they all spilled out.

Cole could hardly decide where to focus his attention first. Ahead of the autocoach, the road disappeared into a bowl-shaped pit that resembled a crater from a meteor strike. Two wagons lay upside down on the roof of a local inn. Several trees were white as snow—leaf, limb, and trunk. One home had no walls or roof, but the floor, chimney, and furniture remained neatly in place.

“What happened here?” Twitch moaned.

“You only get one guess,” Jace said.

“I know it was Carnag,” Twitch said. “But what did it do?”

“Those trees aren't supposed to be white, are they?” Cole asked.

“No, it's unnatural,” Mira said. “I also can't imagine it's easy to strip away the walls of a house without knocking over any furniture. We better take a good look. We might find some clues about what we're dealing with.”

She started down the main street of the town. They passed a large tree propped against a sagging building, soil-clotted roots in the air, leafy limbs on the road. A section of the town was a smoldering field of charred rubble.

One side of the tallest building still standing was crusted with pink coral. A granite boulder lay in the middle of a shop, having apparently crashed through the wall. For one stretch the street undulated, like a stormy sea that had paused, leaving an abnormal pattern of swells and troughs. Half of one house was gone, sheared off cleanly so as to reveal a perfect cross section of the inside, like a full-size dollhouse.

The street ended at a reedy lake. Drowned buildings poked out of the foul water for another hundred yards.

“The town is totaled,” Cole said. “How big is this thing? It looks like a giant had a temper tantrum. What can’t Carnag do?”

“Some of this might have been done physically,” Mira said. “But a lot of it had to be shaping—the lumps in the road, the coral, the house neatly sliced in half. Maybe all of it was shaping.”

“So it’s a semblance and a shaper,” Jace said.

“Kind of makes sense,” Mira replied. “It’s made out of shaping power.”

“How powerful are you?” Twitch asked.

Mira laughed softly. “I had some talent. Nothing like this. Don’t forget what Declan told us. This is unrestrained shaping energy, free from my limitations. It’s probably much more powerful than I could ever be.”

Cole ran both hands through his hair. “How do we fight something that can blast the ground out from under us, chop us in half, crush us with a boulder, then grow coral on us?”

“And that’s just for starters,” Twitch added.

“I don’t really know,” Mira said. “We use everything we have. We hope my connection to Carnag can be an advantage somehow. Remember, it can’t

kill me without killing itself.”

“I still worry Declan could be using us,” Jace said. “He might just want Carnag gone, whatever the cost. He might have purposefully sent us to our deaths. If you get killed, Carnag gets wiped out too, and Sambria has one less problem.”

“Maybe,” Mira said. “But it’s something I have to do. It’s my power.”

“You’re not to blame,” Jace said. “You didn’t turn your power into Carnag. Whoever took your power is responsible. Blame your dad. Let him figure this out.”

Mira took a deep breath. “This may be hard for you to understand. I’m not doing this just because I feel guilty. That power is part of me. Like a lost limb. Worse, even. Like a lost piece of my actual self. I’ve wondered for years if I could ever get it back. I knew it might never happen. But this is my chance. It matters enough to me that I’m willing to die trying. If you want to watch from a distance, that’s fine. This town shows how scary Carnag can be. If you want to run away at top speed, I’ll understand.”

“Sometimes I feel like you’re trying to get rid of us,” Cole said.

“I kind of am,” Mira admitted. “This is my risk to take. Not yours. I can live with getting myself killed.”

“Technically, you can’t live if you get killed,” Jace pointed out.

“You know what I mean!” Mira snapped. “My life is mine to risk. I can’t stand the thought of bringing you all down with me.”

“We volunteered for this,” Jace said. “You didn’t make us.”

“He’s right,” Cole said.

“I know,” Mira said. “But you don’t have to keep volunteering. Sky Raiders run from danger. It’s what we know. It’s how we’ve gotten this far. But this time we’re heading right at the danger. We’re tracking it down on purpose. And I’m not going to run.”

They all contemplated that in silence.

“You might need us,” Cole said. “You might not survive without us. Jace is pretty good with that rope.”

“I sure am,” Jace said. “Don’t try to get rid of me ever again. I’m done having this conversation. If you’re determined, I am too. I see the town. It’s a mess. We knew this thing was powerful. But I won’t abandon you.”

“If it goes really bad, we can still try to run,” Twitch said. “You know, last minute. I’m not quitting now.”

“What about you, Cole?” Mira asked. “You’re not even from here. You have friends to find. Do you really want to get killed fighting my shaping power?”

“I don’t want to get killed,” Cole said. “I promised my friends that I’d find them, and I’m going to keep that promise. Your father has my friends as slaves. His laws led to us being taken from our world. You want to overthrow him. Doing that would be the surest way to help my friends. It all starts with you getting your powers back. I’m with you, Mira. Not only because I need to help Jenna and Dalton. You’re my friend too.”

Mira wiped at her eyes. “Okay. I’m grateful. It’s not that I want you to leave. I just feel so responsible.”

“We get it,” Jace said.

“Where did you kids come from?” a voice interrupted.

They all jumped and whirled toward the speaker. An older man with a long white beard was coming their way down a side street. He wore dirty work clothes and walked as if he might be a little arthritic.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he said. “I’m wondering what news you’ve had.”

“We came from the northwest,” Cole said. “Things are quiet that way. The towns have evacuated.”

“We were mostly evacuated,” the old man said, drawing closer. “Some of the men stayed to fight.”

“You saw Carnag?” Mira exclaimed.

The man shook his head. “Not me. I weathered the attack down in my root cellar. I’d seen a town the monster had hit. It leaves some of the buildings untouched. I’ve lived here all my life. Decided to take my chances hiding out.”

“What happened to the men?” Cole asked.

“No sign of them,” the old man said, his voice quavering. After a moment, he regained his composure. “You’re the first people to happen by since Carnag visited five days ago.”

“Any idea which way the monster went?” Twitch asked.

“Looked like the fiend doubled back the way it came,” the old man said. “I didn’t see it, mind you, just signs of its passage. That’s been the pattern. Carnag ventures out farther every time, but falls back between forays.”

“Are you all right?” Mira asked. “Do you need anything?”

“I have plenty,” the old man said. “A whole town’s supplies. The worst of it should be behind me. So far there have been no reports of Carnag hitting

the same place twice. What brings you this way?"

"Family emergency," Mira said. "We better get going."

"Need provisions?" the old man asked.

"We have enough," Mira said. "Thanks, though. Keep safe."

"You too, young lady."

They returned to the autocoach. Mira instructed Bertram to go around the pit in the road and then continue to the southeast.

The autocoach trotted ahead through the night. Whenever he jerked awake, Cole peered out the window, half-expecting to see a monstrosity charging at them. But all he saw was the countryside under the dull light of a reddish moon.

"No star," Mira said one time after he looked outside.

"No?" Cole asked.

"I haven't seen my star since we fled through the cloud-wall," Mira said.

"I guess that means nobody can trace us," Cole said.

"No enemies and no help."

"Is it almost morning?" Cole asked.

"Not yet," Mira said. "Try to rest."

"What about you?"

"I'm trying too."

Just after sunrise, they heard the pounding rhythm of an approaching gallop. A quick look revealed a lone legionnaire racing along the road from the opposite direction. Jace got his rope ready.

"It's one guy," Mira said. "He's probably not here for us. He may just ride by."

The horseman slowed as he reached the autocoach. He looked like a teenager, though he might have been twenty. His uniform was disheveled. "Whoa!" he called. "You people need to turn around right away!"

Mira ordered the autocoach to stop.

"What's the problem?" Jace asked.

"Only the biggest threat in Sambria," the legionnaire said, panic behind his eyes. "How did you get this far without catching on? Carnag is just beyond the next hill."

His insides squirming with anxiety, Cole instantly turned his attention to the road ahead. He saw where the lane disappeared behind the next rise. Everything looked quiet and normal.

"Is it coming this way?" Mira asked.

"I'm not waiting around to find out," the legionnaire said. "I was part of a scouting party with eleven other soldiers. Good horsemen. I'm the only one who got clear."

"Did you see it?" Mira pressed.

"Glimpsed it through the trees," the legionnaire said. "It's gigantic, I can tell you that much. Hard to speak to the details. The others wanted a closer look. They got it all right."

"You abandoned your unit?" Mira asked.

"We're a scouting party!" the young legionnaire protested. "Somebody has to report back. It might not be too late for you. Turn around."

Jace looked at Mira. "What do we do?"

"Take him," Mira said.



The golden rope lashed out, bound the soldier's arms to his sides, and yanked him off his horse. The legionnaire hit the ground hard, his pinioned arms unable to help break his fall. The horse whinnied and reared, then settled down.

At first the legionnaire could only cough and wheeze. "What are you doing?" he finally managed.

"We're on holiday," Bertram replied. "My grandniece and grandnephews are helping me take in the countryside."

"Let me go!" the soldier cried. "Do what you want, but don't hold me here!"

"Play dead, soldier!" Mira ordered. "We have nothing to fear from Carnag. We work with it. Keep your mouth shut, or we'll make you a sacrifice."

The legionnaire mostly obeyed. Cole heard faint whimpering.

"Do you have some of that tea?" Mira whispered to Twitch.

"It isn't warm," Twitch said. "But I've kept some of it in water since we left Gerta's place. It should be pretty potent."

"Give him some," Mira instructed.

"Feel this?" Jace asked. The rope creaked as it tightened.

The soldier cried out.

"I can make it much tighter," Jace said. "Our friend here has a refreshment for you. Drink it, and we'll let you live."

"How do I know it isn't poison?" the legionnaire asked as Twitch climbed down to him.

"Because there are easier ways to kill you," Jace said. "For example, I could squeeze you to death."

The soldier let out an anguished groan.

While Twitch gave the tea to the legionnaire, Cole leaned over to Mira. “If the legionnaires are scouting this thing, does that mean your father isn’t directly involved?”

“Probably,” she said. “Unless he’s keeping it secret from his own people, which is possible.”

“What . . . what . . . what was that stuff?” the legionnaire asked, his words slurred.

“Herbal tea,” Twitch said.

“Not bad,” the soldier said contentedly. “Am I sinking? Feels a little like . . . like I’m . . .” The legionnaire sagged.

Twitch snapped his fingers by the legionnaire’s ear. “He’s out. Might have been an extra-strong dose. The tea looks really dark.”

“Good,” Mira said. “We can’t have him in the way. In fact, I don’t want to risk leaving him here. Tie him up and we’ll bring him.”

Jace pulled some spare rope from the storage compartment. After binding the soldier’s wrists, legs, and arms, it took all three boys to drag him up into the autocoach.

“I wonder if I should ride the horse,” Mira said. “It might be good to have the extra speed and mobility.”

“Go for it,” Jace said.

Just then Mango fluttered down to the window. “I’m not sure if this is good news or bad, but Carnag is just up ahead.”

“We know,” Mira said. “Where have you been?”

“It’s been hectic.” Mango sighed. “I’m keeping track of many things.”

“Did you see it?” Mira asked.

“I didn’t want to get too close,” the bird said. “It’s big. And noisy. I heard people crying for help.”

“Thanks, Mango,” Mira said.

“On the bright side, I helped bring some assistance,” Mango said.

A guy on a flying disk swooped alongside the autocoach. “Better late than never,” Liam announced.

“Liam!” Cole exclaimed. “I thought you said you’d be too busy to help out!”

Liam scrunched his face apologetically. “I know. I didn’t want you guys counting on me. But I got bored.”

“You’re here because you were bored?” Jace asked.

“Why not? I like how nonchalant it sounds. You want the whole story? We had to flee Cloudvale, and Declan is settled in his new hideout, so I figured they could spare me. I’m here with permission.”

“How’d you find us?” Mira asked.

“You didn’t think Mango was only spying for you?” Liam chided. “She reported to some of my other birds so I could keep track of your progress.”

“Kind of a shady gift,” Mira said.

He placed a hand over his heart. “I did it to be helpful. Promise.”

“Do you know anything new about Carnag?” Cole asked.

“I haven’t had a close look yet,” Liam replied. “But I can feel it more clearly than before. It’s just throbbing with power. I’m no slouch at shaping, but I can’t imagine my power burning half so bright. This won’t be easy. What’s the plan?”

Nobody answered.

“We’re kind of making this up as we go,” Mira said.

“Might be all we can do,” Liam said. “Nobody has ever confronted anything like this. Tell you what. I’ll hang back and watch how it goes, study Carnag for weaknesses. That way you’ll have somebody in reserve.”

“That’s really brave of you,” Jace said.

“I’m being strategic!” Liam complained. “Who’s going to save everybody if this goes bad? You?”

“Is anybody else coming?” Jace asked.

“I tried to talk Asia into joining us,” Liam said. “She’s too set on defending Declan. But an old friend of yours is on his way. Well, more of an acquaintance. Barely even that. He’s on your side, though.”

“Who?” Cole asked.

“Joe MacFarland.”

“The guy from Skyport?” Mira asked. “The messenger?”

“The man is dedicated,” Liam said. “He warned us that the legion was planning a major offensive through the Boomerang Forest.”

“How’d he warn you?” Mira asked.

“He used the confusion of you guys escaping Skyport to find a hiding place,” Liam said. “Keeping his ear to the ground, he discovered you had escaped into the Eastern Cloudwall and lived. When he learned about the planned offensive, he stole a skycraft and came through the cloudwall to warn you. I rescued him from the terminal void the same way I saved you four.”

“Where is he now?”

“Coming as fast as he can on horseback,” Liam said.

“Why didn’t you bring him?” Jace asked.

“How big does my disk look? It’s hard to keep it aloft away from the Brink. Some of my birds are guiding him.”

“Should we wait?” Mira asked.

“I’m leaning toward no,” Liam said. “After missing us at Cloudvale, the legionnaires are coming this way. Joe is a good distance behind me. There’s a chance he’ll never make it to us. Right now will be our best opportunity to confront Carnag without the legion at our backs.”

“Sounds okay to me,” Mira said. She approached the legionnaire’s horse and stroked its neck. “Good girl. You don’t mind heading back into danger, do you?”

“Have you ridden a lot?” Cole asked.

“A fair amount,” Mira said. “I had lessons in my youth, and opportunities have come up over the years. She feels warm. He was riding her hard.” Placing a foot in a stirrup, she mounted up. “You guys ready?”

“I’m not sure,” Cole said. “How about ‘willing’?”

“Good enough,” Mira said.

Liam laughed warmly. “I’m going to put some distance between us. You won’t see me at first, but I’d like to stay in communication.” Drifting closer to Cole, he held out a hand. “If you put these in your ears, I’ll be able to hear you, and you’ll hear me. They won’t work over huge distances, but they should be perfect for today.”

Cole took what looked like a pellet of clay. The others each accepted one as well.

“It’s not fragile,” Liam explained. “Just squish it in there. Not too far. It’ll mold to the shape of your ear canal.”

Cole pressed the pellet into his right ear. It molded to fit snugly.

“Any other goodies?” Jace asked.

“That’s it,” Liam said. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Bertram,” Mira said from astride her mount, “take us to find the monster over the hill.”

The autocoach started forward. Mira kept pace alongside. Liam soared out of sight.

“We came looking for this, and now we found it,” Cole murmured to Twitch. “Be careful what you wish for.”

“Because you might get it?”

Cole gave a nod. “Exactly.”

## CHAPTER

# 32

## CARNAG

**A**s the autocoach came around the side of the little hill, Cole gripped his bow like a lifeline. He wasn't sure what to expect, but he knew it would be horrible. As Mira had made clear, this time they were running toward the danger.

He wasn't sure how to prepare himself. Was he going to shoot an arrow at something that turned towns upside down and defeated regiments of trained soldiers? Maybe it would have a weak spot. At least he could help distract it while Mira figured out how to defeat it. With his Jumping Sword, he might be hard to catch.

What if he got killed? He tried not to dwell on the possibility, but he couldn't resist. There was a very real chance that they were all about to die. Nobody back home would care. His parents didn't remember him. There would be no mourning, no grave. It would be like he had never existed.

What would happen to Dalton, Jenna, and the others from his world? He supposed they couldn't blame him for not saving them if he got killed. That

was a pretty ironclad excuse.

Then again, if he did nothing, that wouldn't rescue them either. They might never know it, but he was doing his best to help them.

He was relieved Liam had come. His shaping might not be as strong here as at the Brink, but the guy could fly, and he was confident, and he certainly had useful skills. Hopefully, Liam would be able to lend Mira the kind of support she deserved.

"There," Jace said, pointing into the woods.

Cole squinted. In the distance, treetops swayed violently, as if something not much shorter than them was passing through.

"I see it," Mira replied from astride her mount. "Bertram, can we go that way?"

"The forest is too thick for the autocoach," Bertram said. "Perhaps we can work our way around the perimeter of the woodlands."

"You better just stop and let them out," Mira replied. "Then try to work your way around. Stay as close to us as possible. Flail, follow!"

Cole jumped down. Mira led the way into the forest on horseback, cantering through the trees, the flail jangling in her wake. Jace used his rope to slingshot himself from trunk to trunk. Twitch put on his ring and started hopping. Cole knifed forward, using the Jumping Sword to take long low leaps between the trees. Soon he was ahead of Mira.

There came a creaking moan, like a barn about to collapse or the hull of an old ship under stress. The hugeness of the sound made Cole pause. The great creaking repeated, somewhat lower and slower. Mira kept loping forward, guiding her horse through the light undergrowth. Jace and Twitch continued



to advance as well. Feeling a little jealous of the legionnaire sleeping back in the autocoach, Cole exclaimed, "Away!" and sprang ahead.

After a few more jumps, Cole saw Jace stop at the edge of a meadow. Twitch came to a halt beside him. Their backs to Cole, the two just stared. Cole heard the enormous creaking again, massive groans of tortured wood.

Cole's next leap brought him almost to his companions. As he edged forward, he looked out to the meadow and caught his first sight of Carnag.

The towering creature was made of tree stumps, dirt, rock, shrubs, part of a chimney, wooden beams, some crumbling battlements, bricks of varied shapes and sizes, half a wagon, a section of cobblestone street, a damaged rowboat, and three iron cages. It balanced on two asymmetrical legs and had a pair of long arms, but it was only vaguely humanoid, like a haphazard scarecrow. The misshapen head displayed a crude imitation of a face.

The scale of the monstrosity was astonishing. Cole stood no taller than its ankle. Only the loftiest trees in the forest overtopped it. The moaning creak hadn't come from the mouth—it was the sound of Carnag taking steps. With a grating of stone against stone and a crackling of timbers, the giant bent over. It gripped a good-size tree with one hand and yanked it out of the ground with an earthy rending of roots and soil.

Tree in hand like a club, Carnag turned to face them from the far side of the clearing. The colossus roared, the bellow blending the howl of a jet engine with the deep rumble of an earthquake. The cacophonous cry reverberated for a long time, echoing strangely, the volume surging unpredictably.

The roar shook Cole to his core. He felt like he had awakened on railroad tracks to find a train bearing down on him.

“Get out of here!”

“Run for it!”

“Go for help!”

As overlapping voices shouted desperate advice, Cole realized that the cages making up part of Carnag’s body were occupied. One cage served as most of its right shoulder, another was embedded in the left side of its chest, and the third took up much of one hip. The people inside, many in legionnaire uniforms, waved and yelled.

Carnag took a step toward Cole. Though the meadow was large, the giant was only three or four steps away.

“Split up,” Jace advised, using his rope to launch himself to the left.

Twitch took off to the right.

Cole held his sword tightly. Should he keep still? If he followed Jace or Twitch, they wouldn’t be splitting up very effectively. Carnag took another step in his direction, the ground trembling beneath its creaky weight. Cole wasn’t sure what move to make. Should he fall back? Should he try to juke the giant at the last second?

Another step. The jolt to the ground made Cole’s teeth rattle. Carnag reached out its free hand, crouching toward him. One more step and the hand would grab him. Cole decided to gamble on a last-second jump between the legs.

Still on horseback, Mira emerged from the trees beside Cole. “Carnag!” she called. “We have to talk!”

Carnag froze, then drew up straight and tall, all attention now on Mira. “You!” Carnag said, the female voice deep and raspy. The word repeated like an echo in reverse, growing louder through the final rebound.

“What have you been doing?” Mira demanded.

Cole could not believe her boldness. For the moment, her courageous accusation seemed to have stalled the monster.

“I do as I please,” Carnag finally responded, the words echoing backward again, the last reverberation the loudest.

“You belong to me,” Mira said. “You were taken from me.”

“I belong to myself,” Carnag rasped.

“No!” Mira insisted. “You’re part of me. You’re not whole. Neither am I. We need each other.”

A long pause followed. Cole began to wonder whether Carnag would respond. Then the words came. “I’m more now, not less. You were my prison, as was another. Come to me. I will not harm you.”

“Come to you?” Mira asked.

“You will belong to me now,” Carnag said, crouching and reaching.

Mira drew her sword and jumped from her horse, landing on a high limb in a tree. “I’m not yours!” she yelled. “You’re mine! You come from me.”

This prompted a slow laugh that resembled the unsettling sound a mine might make right before a cave-in. “I am much, much more than you.”

The giant hand grasped for her again, and Mira jumped a great distance to land in another tree. Cole noticed Jace casting out his rope. It lengthened more than Cole had ever seen, thickening as well, and wrapped three times around Carnag’s shins.

As Carnag tried to take a step, the golden rope held, and the huge monster toppled forward, knees hitting first, then both hands. Jace immediately reeled in his rope. Mira sprang to another tree.

Carnag stood, tilted her head back, and roared at the sky. Jace covered his ears, but the punishing echoes of the cry pulsed through his body. The leaves and brush around him trembled.

The branches of the tree where Mira perched suddenly closed around her, like a thousand fingers making a fist. The ground where Jace stood surged up on all sides, trapping him in a mound with only his head visible. Carnag whirled and stuck out an arm, catching Twitch in midair.

Twisting, Carnag faced Cole. As the ground heaved up around him, Cole thrust his sword skyward and shouted, "Away!" He soared upward, soil brushing against his legs, but not quick enough to entrap him.

Cole was still rocketing up when he realized his mistake. In his haste to avoid getting swallowed by the ground, he had aimed for the random sky and jumped with everything he had. There was nowhere to land. He had just killed himself.

Near the apex of his flight, Cole looked down from a dizzying height almost level with Carnag's neck. As he started losing altitude, a huge hand appeared beneath him. Landing on Carnag's palm, Cole jabbed his sword toward Carnag's shoulder, yelled out the command word, and jumped before he had settled.

Carnag's fingers closed too slowly, and Cole rushed toward the earthen shoulder. Upon contact, Cole pointed the sword at the nearest tree and kicked off, yelling the command again.

Speeding through the air, Cole watched for where he would land and prepared for his next jump. He'd never really tried stringing jumps together like this so rapidly. It took some of the jolt away from the landings. Or maybe that was the adrenalin.

Just before he landed, Carnag's giant hand closed around him, snagging him in midflight and holding him tightly. Cole squirmed, but there was no give.

Carnag slapped Cole into the cage in her chest. The door clanged shut before Cole could react. Five legionnaires shared the cell with him, their uniforms torn and soiled. One of them helped Cole to his feet. There was also a woman, and a child of maybe eight years.

The door open again, and Twitch was flung inside as well. Jace came a moment later. They both looked stunned.

"Welcome to your home away from home," one of the legionnaires said.

"You better hope it doesn't trip again," another added, rubbing the side of his forehead.

"Do you hear me, Cole?" Liam asked in his right ear. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Cole said softly. "We're trapped, but not hurt."

"Looks like she's out to capture you rather than squash you," Liam said. "I'm going to hang back for now."

The back of the cage was the wood, stone, and dirt of Carnag. Thick metal bars composed one side and the front, including the hinged gate that allowed access. Cole went to the gate and tugged on it to no avail. He still had his Jumping Sword, but he wasn't sure what good it would do behind bars.

When Carnag turned and started moving again, Cole clung to the bars to avoid falling. Creaking and swaying, Carnag stepped toward the tree that still held Mira. Carnag reached for the tree, and the branches unfolded.

“Flail, attack!” Mira cried. The Shaper’s Flail went for Carnag’s hand, whirling wildly to bash away clods of dirt, fragments of stone, and chunks of wood. After flinching away from the initial onslaught, Carnag snatched the flail out of the air, like a person grabbing a bug, and kept her hand tightly closed.

Mira used the diversion to shout the command word and leap to the ground. When Carnag rounded on her, Cole felt like he was looking down at his friend from high on the wall of a cliff. Carnag crouched to reach for her, making the cell tilt forward.

Cole wanted to close his eyes. If Carnag caught Mira, this was basically over! They were all getting captured too easily. It would be up to Liam.

Mira wasn’t pointing her sword to attempt another jump. She glared up at the giant stoically.

“No, Carnag!” Mira yelled. She put the tip of the Jumping Sword to her throat. “Back off, or I end us!”

Carnag stopped reaching. Cole wondered if Mira had planned to use this bluff, or if it had occurred to her out of desperation.

The giant stood up straight. “You really would,” Carnag said, mildly puzzled. From where Cole sat, the mounting echoes soaked in from all directions. “I feel your resolve.”

“You bet I will,” Mira called. “Better that I die than you rampage around Sambria, hurting my friends.”

“I haven’t killed,” Carnag said.

“I find that hard to believe,” Mira replied.

“I don’t kill,” Carnag repeated. “I collect.”

“Is that true?” Mira shouted.

“I haven’t seen it kill anyone,” one of the legionnaires in Cole’s cell called back.

“Me neither,” a woman answered from below, probably in the cage at the hip. “But it isn’t gentle.”

“I collect,” Carnag maintained.

“You can’t collect people,” Mira scolded. “That’s no way to act. We belong together. Come back to me.”

Carnag didn’t respond.

“Do you hear that?” Twitch asked.

“What?” Jace wondered.

“A faint voice,” Twitch said, moving toward the back of the cell.

“I’ve heard it too,” one of the legionnaires said. “Like it comes from inside this thing.”

Twitch leaned up against the back wall of the cell and placed his ear against a wooden beam. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s a woman. Her voice is muffled. I can’t understand her. But she’s talking a lot.”

Carnag crouched and knelt on one knee, giving Cole a closer view of Mira. She kept the point of her sword at her throat.

A tendril snaked forward from Carnag, slithering over the ground toward Mira. She watched it with wide eyes. “I’ll do it!” she warned.

“Talk first,” Carnag said, the words reverse-echoing strongly.

At the end of the tendril, the ground swelled up. A perfect duplicate of Mira emerged, wearing the same clothes, holding a matching sword. The tendril was lodged in the center of her back, tethering her to Carnag's foot.

"Hello," the fake Mira said.

"What is this?" Mira asked.

"We need to talk," fake Mira said calmly, her voice just like Mira's. Cole didn't have to strain to hear. It seemed like Liam must be using the clay earpieces to help broadcast the discussion.

"You're not me," Mira accused. "You're a semblance."

"I'm not you," fake Mira said. "I'm me. You can't beat me. You're the weak part. I could protect you."

"You're not anything!" Mira said angrily. "You're phony! You're made of stuff you found! Dirt and wood and junk!"

"I can be whatever I want," fake Mira said. "Whatever I need to be. We all shape ourselves. I'm just better at it."

"You were taken from me," Mira said. "Shaped away from me. I don't know how. Do you?"

A second tendril slithered forward. When it neared Mira, the ground bulged, and the tendril became attached to a man in fine clothes. "I did it," he said.

"That isn't funny!" Mira spat. "No more puppet shows. You're not him! You're not my father!"

Cole scowled down at the well-dressed semblance. From his current vantage point, it was hard to see all the details. But assuming the man had



been shaped as accurately as the fake Mira, it was his first view of his enemy, the High King.

“Are you sure?” the false High Shaper said. “I’m close enough. This entity spent a great deal of time with me. Much more time than you did. And much more time than it spent with you.”

Mira turned to her double. “You weren’t part of him. You were his prisoner.”

“She was part of me,” the fake High King said. “*And* she was my prisoner.”

Mira stepped close to her semblance clone. “Don’t you see? He took you. My father stole you. But now you’re free. We can be together again. We’re supposed to be together.”

There was no reaction from Carnag or the tethered semblances.

“I hear the talking again,” Twitch said. “This is messed up. Someone is in there saying stuff.”

“Can you make out any words?” Jace asked.

“No,” Twitch said, frustrated.

“You want to own me like he owned me,” fake Mira finally said. “You want to drown me inside of you! If I go back to you, I die. You’re coming with me. We’re both going to survive.”

“I’m not bluffing about the sword,” Mira said.

“I’m not bluffing either,” fake Mira answered. “What if I love my freedom? What if I’d rather end than go back?”

“Twitch is right,” Liam said in Cole’s ear. “I’m fantastic at discerning physical compositions. There’s a woman inside of Carnag.”

“Mira!” Cole called. “Ask Carnag about the woman inside of her! The woman talking to her!”

Both the fake Mira and the semblance of Mira’s father abruptly looked up at Cole. Their expressions told him he was on to something.

“The boy lies,” the fake Mira and fake father asserted in unison.

“What woman is inside you?” Mira asked. “Is somebody controlling you?”

The semblances paused.

“I hear her again,” Twitch said. “Quieter.”

Cole pressed his ear to the beam below Twitch. The murmur of hurried conversation was faint but definite.

“I hear her!” Cole said loudly.

“We hear the woman,” Mira asserted. “Who is she? Don’t listen to her! You’re part of me! Listen to *me!*”

“You’re unworthy, Mira,” her fake father accused. “You would have squandered your power. You let me take her, and you ran away!”

“I ran because my father was after me,” Mira cried. “I ran because I didn’t understand what happened. I used to shape so many things! Then it was gone. Stolen.”

“Then use your shaping,” her fake father challenged. “If you’re worthy, take back what’s yours. If not, accept her protection and let her live. Let her thrive. Let her be all the things you were too inept to make her.”

“I can barely shape anymore,” Mira said. “I’d be lucky to change the color of my shirt. Why? Because my shaping power was taken.”

“Interesting,” her fake father murmured.

“More talking,” Twitch called.

“Can you make out what she’s saying?” Cole whispered, hoping Liam would understand that the question was meant for him.

“Sadly, no,” Liam replied.

“Who are you talking to?” Mira demanded. “Who’s in there?”

“Give me the sword,” Mira’s fake father said, holding out a hand. “We don’t want a tragedy.”

“Come an inch closer, and I’ll cut my throat,” Mira promised.

“She’s serious,” the false Mira said.

“I know,” the fake father grumbled.

“What do you call yourself?” Mira asked her double.

Fake Mira hesitated. “Some call me Carnag. I suppose that is a good name for my exterior.”

“Is that what you call yourself?” Mira asked.

“No,” fake Mira replied. “I call myself Miracle.”

“She’s the true miracle,” her fake father said. “She does wonders you could never have achieved.”

“I didn’t get much chance,” Mira said. “I was eleven. I’m *still* eleven.” Mira turned to her duplicate. “You call yourself Miracle because you come from me. My father stole you. Was the woman inside of you involved?”

There came a long pause.

“I don’t hear anything,” Twitch reported. “She could be whispering.”

“Is she still talking to you?” Mira asked.

“Maybe,” fake Mira said.

“Why are you listening to her? Who is she?”

Fake Mira held up a hand to stop Mira from talking. “You wouldn’t understand. She’s . . . she’s my mother. Not *your* mother. Not Harmony. *My* mother.”

“Your *mother*?” Mira exclaimed. “Does that mean she made you? Is she who stole you?”

“I freed Miracle from you,” her fake father said smugly.

“Did she tell you she’s your mother?” Mira asked. “Who is she really? I’m more your mother than anyone! You came from me!”

“Don’t be absurd,” Mira’s fake father growled.

“I want to talk to this woman,” Mira said.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” fake Mira said. “Not yet. Later. After you come with us. She’ll help you understand.”

“I’m not coming with you,” Mira said.

“You’ll see,” fake Mira said. “You can free me. Fully free me. Free us. From each other. Cut all ties. We can go our separate ways. She can teach you.”

“You’re my shaping power!” Mira shouted. “We’re not meant to be separated. How would you like to lose your shaping power?”

“I can’t,” the fake Mira said simply. “I *am* shaping power.”

Mira gasped. Her fake father stepped forward and took hold of her. Mira struggled, but he was stronger. Carnag reached down and picked her up.

It took Cole a moment to realize what had happened. Mira had dropped her Jumping Sword. It was no longer a sword. It was a stick.

## CHAPTER

# 33

## MIRACLE

“**C**arnag turned her sword into a stick!” Cole exclaimed.

“I know,” Liam replied in his ear. “That’s bad. The rendering was designed to be difficult to tamper with. And I was taking countermeasures to hold it together. It took some time, but Carnag figured it out. That means everything we have could be vulnerable.”

Jace and Twitch crowded the bars and watched as Carnag loaded Mira into the cage at her hip. On the ground, the semblances of Mira and her father approached Carnag’s foot, merged with it, and disappeared. The colossus stood up.

“Put me with my friends!” Mira yelled.

“Privileges are earned,” Carnag replied emphatically.

“Can you guys hear me?” Mira whispered. “Are you all right?”

“We’re caged inside a giant monster,” Cole replied. “Otherwise, we’re fine.”

“How do you hear one another?” Carnag bellowed. “Silence!”

The cage shook brusquely. Cole clung to the bars to stay on his feet.

“Don’t make it madder,” one of the legionnaires advised.

“I haven’t lost all of my shaping skills,” Mira called.

“Is that Miracle down there?” another of the legionnaires asked. “*The* Miracle, from all those years ago?”

Cole considered the legionnaire. Apparently the conversation between Mira and Carnag had provided him with enough clues to guess what was really happening. If he was adding up the facts, Cole figured it would be best to put the whole truth into circulation.

“Her father stole her powers,” Cole said.

“You don’t mean the High King, do you?” the same legionnaire replied.

Cole nodded. “He stole the shaping powers from all of his daughters and faked their deaths. Mira’s been hiding all this time. Her father started losing the stolen powers, and Mira’s powers turned into Carnag.”

Everyone in the cage looked astonished.

“Who are you three?” a different legionnaire asked.

“Nobody important,” Jace said. “We’re helping her. Or trying.”

“We have to get to that woman inside of Carnag,” Cole said in a hushed tone.

“Good luck,” the oldest of the legionnaires said. “We have our weapons. The monster didn’t bother to confiscate them. We tried to chisel our way out. The creature is really solid. When we finally made a little progress, it just shaped away the damage and shook us around.”

Carnag was walking again, moving through the woods, her long arms pushing trees aside like bushes. With each step, the cell swayed and the

surroundings creaked.

“I may be able to help,” Liam said quietly in Cole’s ear. “I’ll have to get closer, but I should be able to open up Carnag for you, at least briefly.”

“We’ll be ready,” Cole whispered, his heart thumping.

“Where is she taking us?” Twitch asked.

“To put us with the others,” the woman said.

“What others?” Jace asked.

“That’s all she told us,” the oldest legionnaire said. “Presumably, the other people she has taken. You heard her. Carnag collects people.”

Twitch put his ear to the beam. “I think the woman is talking again. It’s pretty soft.”

“Try to catch some words,” Jace urged.

Cole drew near to Jace and used his quietest whisper. “You heard Liam?”

Jace gave a nod and put a finger to his lips. “I’d try to pry it open with my rope, but this thing is too solid.” He kicked the back wall of the cell, then winced and hobbled for a moment. He sat down by Cole, his golden rope in his hands. “Looks like we’re stuck. We’ll have to wait and see where we end up.”

Cole wondered if Carnag bought the theatrics. The giant gave no indication one way or the other.

They passed out of the woods and started across open fields. Cole looked down at a barn and a farmhouse. The buildings appeared vacant, but cattle and sheep roamed some nearby pastures.

He noticed a speck in the distance. It grew rapidly, as if heading straight for them. He nudged Jace, who looked up with a start.

By the time Carnag stopped walking and turned to confront the oncoming threat, Cole could see that it was Liam. He flew straight at Carnag, only swerving when one of those long arms reached for him.

“Get ready,” Liam said as he streaked around behind the giant, not speaking loudly, but plenty loud with the earpiece.

Carnag chased Liam in earnest now, twisting and leaping, both arms swatting. Everyone clung to the cage’s bars as best they could.

“The woman isn’t far from you,” Liam said after a series of dizzying evasive maneuvers. “Be quick! I’ll try to distract it.”

The back of the cell suddenly opened up into a tunnel that sloped inward and down. Wasting no time, Cole dashed into the opening. Jace and Twitch joined him, a step or two behind.

Carnag gave her most enraged roar yet. The overwhelming echoes came from everywhere. Staggering forward with his hands over his ears, Cole could feel the bellow as clearly as he heard it. The ragged walls of the makeshift tunnel quaked.

The tunnel wasn’t very long. Cole reached the end quickly. He was in a simple lit room. A woman sat on a fat cushioned chair. She was middle-aged, with long dark hair and a loose black dress. Her physique hinted that she sat in a chair a lot more than she exercised. Her eyes were wide with alarm as she rose to her feet.

“They’re in—” she started screaming, but Jace’s rope whipped forward and wrapped around her head at the level of her mouth several times. All she managed after that was muffled fury.



“Shut up!” Cole ordered, brandishing his Jumping Sword. “Sit down, or I’ll chop you in half!”

“I’ll do more than that!” Jace promised.

The woman dropped into the chair. Behind him, Cole noticed the tunnel close up. He, Jace, Twitch, and the woman were now trapped in a fairly small space illuminated by glowing stones.

The room lurched sideways, and Cole fell to his knees. Jace went down as well, but he kept hold of the rope. Twitch gave a little jump, fluttered his wings, and stayed on his feet. The chair slid a short distance, but the woman remained in it.

“What are you doing in here?” Cole asked.

The woman glared at him and pointed at the rope over her mouth.

“Right,” Cole said. “Call for help, and we’ll show no mercy.”

She gave a nod.

The coils of the rope loosened, sliding down to encircle her neck. Her eyes stayed on Cole. She curled her fingers at him and glowered. “How did you get in here? That was a strong act of shaping, yet I sense no active power in any of you.”

“None of your business,” Cole said. “Tell Carnag to let us go.”

She grinned and gave a smug laugh. “Let you go? Are you trying to hold me hostage? You haven’t seen Carnag mad yet. But you will.”

One wall of the cell bulged, and Mira stepped out, a tendril in her back. Up close, the semblance was uncannily lifelike. “What are you doing in here?” fake Mira asked.

“Let Mira go,” Cole said. “Let all of us go.”

“Do you see what I’ve been telling you?” the woman said. “You resist killing them, but all they want is to destroy you! To destroy me! They were strangling me! You have to fight fire with fire!”

“Stop yapping!” Jace yelled.

“Be polite!” fake Mira commanded, pointing at Jace. She glared at the woman in the chair. “Quima, I’ve told you not to pressure me to kill.”

“This Quima woman lacks full control over Carnag,” Liam said in Cole’s ear. “There’s at least some resistance.”

A tunnel opened opposite from where Cole had entered. It angled downward.

“Great,” fake Mira said. “Like it wasn’t hard enough to concentrate already.”

Mira came racing up the tunnel. She had no tendrils attached to her. Cole felt pretty sure that meant she was the real thing. The tunnel closed behind her. The little room rocked steeply to the side, making everyone stumble and crouch. The room swayed the other way, then steadied.

“Who is this guy bothering me?” fake Mira asked. “He’s the best shaper I’ve come up against. Not more than I can handle. Pesky, though.”

The real Mira stormed over to the woman in the chair. “Who are you?”

“Mira,” fake Mira said, performing the introductions, “this is Quima. Quima, Mira.”

“We all need to settle down,” Quima recommended.

Fake Mira scowled. “I can’t get ahold of this guy. He’s slippery. I’m trying to unshape his flying pad, but it’s really resistant.”

“Let’s call a truce,” Mira suggested. “Miracle, tell Liam you want a truce. Tell him I want him to stop attacking so we can talk.”

Cole heard the big Carnag voice offer a truce to Liam. Almost immediately, the confined room became more stable.

“He agreed,” fake Mira said. “But the truce only lasts as long as I choose.”

“That’s how every truce works,” Jace muttered. “And it goes both ways.”

Fake Mira scowled at him. “Get that rope away from Quima. If you hurt her, I can’t be responsible for how I’ll react.”

The rope shrank to its smallest form, and Jace held it behind his back.

Fake Mira walked over to Mira. “You didn’t have to force this discussion. We would have talked soon. I just wanted to put the others with my collection first.”

“The other people you’ve taken are all imprisoned?” Cole asked.

“Would you rather I killed them?” fake Mira asked.

“Miracle, this is crazy,” Mira said. “What has Quima been telling you?”

“Quima is the one person on my side,” fake Mira said. “I didn’t collect her. She came here on purpose. She wants to be here. She wants me to be free. You want to destroy me. Who would you trust?”

Mira was at a loss.

Cole jumped in. “Quima might not be your friend. She might have helped take you from Mira.”

“Then I thank her for my existence,” fake Mira said.

“You existed as part of me,” Mira said.

“Not like this,” fake Mira countered, laughing softly. “I’m whatever I want to be now.”

“And what is that?” Mira asked. “A pile of dirt and tree stumps that kidnaps people?”

“This is just the beginning,” fake Mira said. “The next step is for me to become truly free of you. Completely. Quima will help us achieve it. You’ll have to help too.”

“Dream on,” Mira said.

Fake Mira’s laugh had a menacing edge to it. “You’ll do it. Or you won’t be free either. Ever. You or your friends.”

“Mira, your shaping talent is flowing to you like never before,” Liam said, his voice soft in the earpiece. “I don’t know if it’s because you’re surrounded by your power, or some other reason, but try to keep Carnag talking.”

Mira closed her eyes and took a breath. Cole knew she was pretending to think while listening to Liam. When she opened them, she spoke calmly and earnestly. “They stole you from me. My life has been a nightmare ever since. You were with my father. You know what he put me through. Now you want to steal yourself from me too?”

Fake Mira frowned. “Do you think I like you? Do you imagine that I owe you? Do you think I’m sorry I’m free? I don’t feel like part of you, Mira. You aren’t my missing half. If I came from you, congratulations for making something wonderful. But I don’t belong to you anymore. I never will again. Until you cut all ties with me, I’ll make sure you won’t be free either.”

“Your power wants to be with you,” Liam coached Mira. “It’s the mind of this semblance that stands in the way. You have to defeat her. Don’t give up. Carnag still has the vast majority of your ability, but more escapes to you every second.”

“What will you do after you’re free from me?” Mira asked.

Fake Mira glanced at Quima. “Whatever I want.”

“Whatever you want?” Mira questioned. “Or whatever Quima tells you? You’ve been a tool for my father. How do I know you won’t just become a tool for her? Do you even know what you want?”

Fake Mira paused, glancing nervously at Quima. “I want to be me. I want to be myself.”

“You keep saying you want to be yourself,” Mira said. “Who is that?”

Fake Mira faltered. “Someone independent of you.”

“You’re my shaping power,” Mira said. “You became a self-shaping semblance. You know why we call them semblances, right? Because they *resemble* living things. They’re not, but they resemble them. Think of the semblances you make. They seem like they have identities. But they don’t. They’re whatever you make them.”

“I’m different!” fake Mira exclaimed. “I’m what I make myself.”

“Then why do you use my name?” Mira asked. “And why do you look like me?”

Fake Mira fell silent.

“Don’t bother her with dull questions,” Quima said. “You’re her prisoner. You’re only talking to her by her permission.”

Fake Mira held up a hand. “We’re talking so I can convince her to set me free. Mira, I look like you out of habit. It’s convenient. But I can look however I want. There are many names I could use. Carnag is one.”

“You could fake an identity,” Mira agreed. “That’s what semblances do. You can look like me or my father. You can pick up pieces of things you see

and make them part of you. That doesn't mean you're alive. If you think about it, looking any way you want is the opposite of having an identity. You're a complicated, powerful semblance. But you *are* a semblance. Semblances are extensions of the will of their creator. Unless somebody else takes control." Mira turned her attention to Quima.

"How could anyone control Miracle?" Quima asked. "Everyone in this room only lives thanks to her generosity. I lend her advice. I give her friendship. And I think she has the right to exist. Is that a crime?"

"It is if you're tricking her," Mira said. "It is if you're only trying to be the next person who steals her from me."

"Nobody can steal me," fake Mira said. "I make my own choices."

"Do you?" Mira asked. "When did you choose to leave me?"

Fake Mira offered no answer. Her eyes strayed to Quima.

"When did you choose to be born, Mira?" Quima snapped.

"Yes!" fake Mira agreed. "Some choices aren't ours to make."

Mira gave Cole a nervous glance. The quick look told him that she was about to gamble. "When did you decide you're better off separate from me?"

"It was . . . ," fake Mira started, then hesitated. "It was after talking with Quima."

"Really," Mira said.

Fake Mira flushed. "Quima gave me good advice. I chose to take it."

"Do you take a lot of her advice?" Mira asked.

"She's a friend," fake Mira said. "Like a mother. I don't do everything she wants."

"For example?" Mira pressed.

“She wants me to kill people who attack me,” fake Mira said. “I . . . don’t like that idea. If they can’t hurt me, I’d rather just collect them.”

“You got that from me,” Mira said. “I hate the idea of killing anything. Even bugs. But I did have lots of collections. Before I left the palace.”

“I know everything about you,” fake Mira said. “I don’t need reminders.”

“You’re letting an enemy exploit you,” Mira said. “She’s manipulating you.”

“Quima wants me free,” fake Mira said. “You want me trapped.”

“If I die, so do you,” Mira said. “We’re fundamentally linked. How can Quima change that?”

“You have to be willing to let me go,” fake Mira said. “Then she’ll use her shapecraft to separate us permanently.”

“What’s shapecraft?” Mira asked. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Me neither,” Liam inserted.

“One of many things you don’t know,” fake Mira said condescendingly. “Shapecraft is to shaping as shaping is to everything else.”

Mira looked somber. “Quima can mess with the shaping power itself?”

“Exactly,” fake Mira replied.

“Which means she can mess with you,” Mira said.

“I would never—” Quima began, but fake Mira held up her hand.

“She can free me from you,” fake Mira said. “That’s all she wants.”

Mira emphasized her next words. “What if she just wants you free from me so she can take control of you?”

Cole thought Quima looked like she was trying to act unflustered.

Fake Mira glanced at Quima with a hint of suspicion.

“You’re on to something,” Liam encouraged. “Keep going.”

“Hmmm,” Mira continued. “Why would Quima care about helping pure shaping power find freedom as a semblance? It isn’t her power. She would have no reason to feel attached. Why mother it? Guide it? What would be in it for her? Not much. Unless the goal was to trick it. Maybe she was partners with whoever stole it in the first place. Maybe the whole plan was for her to take control of it.”

Fake Mira stepped close to Mira and put a hand on her shoulder. “Drop it. If it’s a trick, it worked. I’d rather be with her than with you. My choice will never change. I don’t care if you think I have no identity. I’m content with who I am. So is Quima. If you refuse to set me free, I’ll do whatever it takes to change your mind. Stop clinging to me. I’m not yours anymore. Let me go.”

Cole could tell that the conversation was unraveling and that it wasn’t going to go their way. What was their next move? How could they fight something so huge?

“Quima holds the reins,” Liam said, his voice urgent and hushed. “She has Carnag’s mind. But the substance of Carnag belongs to you, Mira. At some level, she knows that. You keep soaking up energy.”

“You get that Quima could have shaped you to feel this way,” Mira said, her tone resigned to failure. “You get that you’re probably only feeling what she planted with her shapecraft. You’re not making choices. You’re reacting as designed. She probably started molding you the second you were on your own.”



“Enough,” Quima said. “Don’t be selfish. I can end this right now. Give me your permission, and I will free you and Miracle from each other.”

“I’ll die first,” Mira insisted.

Mira’s fake father stepped out of the wall behind Jace and held a knife to his throat. “She doesn’t worry about herself,” the tethered semblance said. “How much do you care about your friends, Mira? Those abilities you lost haven’t belonged to you for most of your life. Let them go, and you and your friends will live.”

“What about not killing?” Mira cried.

“I never had enough motivation to take a life,” fake Mira said. “You told me I inherited that trait from you. I may have been wrong to resist Quima on that point. My hesitation must have been you talking. Fortunately, I have the power to change.”

“Don’t give in,” Jace said.

“If she doesn’t, you’ll die, and I’ll move on to the next one,” her fake father said. “It won’t end with your friends, Mira. One by one, innocent after innocent, we’ll apply the needed pressure. You have until I reach five. One.”

“I can’t open up Carnag,” Liam said. “I’m trying to tunnel in, but she won’t let me.”

“Two.”

“How did she improve so fast?” Liam lamented. “I can’t even make a dent now. She adapts so quickly!”

“Three.”

Cole didn’t know what to do. If he attacked the semblance of Mira’s father, the fake king might slash Jace’s throat immediately. Who knew how

else Carnag might attack? After all, they were inside of it.

“Four.”

“You want to hurt my friends?” Mira asked. “You want to cross that line? You asked for it.”

She pointed at the tendril tethering her fake father to the wall. Part of the tendril disappeared, and her fake father immediately dissolved, sword and all.

Mira extended her palm and a tunnel opened straight to the outside. “Jump!” Mira yelled.

Cole didn’t have to be told twice. He raced into the tunnel and held out his sword. Once he could see the ground, he pointed at it, shouted the command word, and sprang.

Looking back as he fell, Cole saw Twitch leap into the air as well. Next came Jace, one arm around Mira, the golden rope now holding Quima. All three flew out of Carnag together.

As Cole plummeted, he watched Liam swoop down to help. In midair, Jace let Liam take Mira. She made his disk wobbly, and he curved away in a rapid descent. Carnag reached out a hand and caught Quima.

Sensing the ground approaching, Cole turned to watch his landing. After rolling to a stop, he saw Jace cushion his landing by coiling the rope beneath him like a spring. The rope was no longer connected to Quima, leaving her to Carnag.

Liam and Mira landed roughly, the disk rolling away from their point of impact after the wipeout. Dust plumed into the air.

“Are you all right?” Cole asked.

“Alive,” Liam said. “My disk really wasn’t made for two people.” He was already running to retrieve it.

“How dare you?” Carnag bellowed. A huge hand reached for Mira. As it got close, Mira waved her arm and the hand vanished. Released from Carnag’s grasp, the Shaper’s Flail fell to the ground.

“Back off!” Mira yelled.

“She’s taking your energy!” Quima shrieked. “She’s using your own power against you!”

“My power!” Mira corrected.

The hand holding Quima disappeared, and the woman plunged downward, skirt flapping. A new hand formed just in time to catch her. Instead of lifting her up again, Carnag set her down.

“Contain Mira!” Quima screamed. “They want to destroy us! Stop them all!”

A cage appeared around Cole, the bars sprouting up out of the ground and connecting overhead. Through the thick bars, Cole saw Mira and Jace trapped inside similar cages not far away. Mira was chained and gagged. Twitch and Liam remained free, both of them airborne.

“Can you shape away the bars?” Liam asked.

Mira shook her head and gave a muffled, “No.”

“Carnag herself must be more vulnerable to you,” Liam realized. “The separate objects that she shapes are more removed from your influence.”

Carnag stomped over to stand before Mira. A tendril slithered forward from one foot, and the fake Mira blossomed up from the ground at the end of the tether. She stormed forward angrily, stopping just outside Mira’s cage.

“Now you’ve done it,” fake Mira said. “Now I’m furious. You’re going to free me from you, or I’m pounding all of you flat. Your friends first, Mira, then you, no matter what it does to me.”

Mira gave an unintelligible response.

Fake Mira waved a hand, and the gag disappeared.

“Flail, attack Quima!” Mira shouted.

The flail zipped toward where the dark-haired woman stood, still looking flustered from her near-fatal fall. When Carnag lunged to defend Quima from the flail, Mira yelled a different command.

“Flail, attack me!”

The flail boomeranged around toward Mira’s cage.

Barely recovering from the lunge, Carnag dove, grabbing the flail just before it collided with the thick bars.

Fake Mira waved a hand, and Mira was gagged again.

Carnag slowly stood up.

Cole craned his neck back to gaze up at the giant. She was so big! It was weird to think that something so enormous could come from Mira. According to Liam, the part that truly came from her wanted to return. Carnag was colossal and terrifying, but in the end, according to Mira, she was just a semblance.

Cole fingered his shawl. Would it have a chance of influencing something so powerful? Could he put it on something so huge?

“You’re willing to die,” fake Mira said. “And you’re willing to get your friends killed. So let’s demonstrate the result of your choices.” She pointed at Jace. “Father tried to deal with that one. How about him first?”

“Get me out,” Cole whispered. “Open my cage.”

“I’m not sure I can,” Liam said. “Even with Carnag’s attention elsewhere, it’d stretch me to my limits.”

“You have to,” Cole said. “I have an idea.”

“That’s more than I’ve got,” Liam admitted.

Two bars on Cole’s cage disappeared. Liam lurched in the sky, almost falling from his disk, but he managed to right himself.

Racing from his cage, Cole dashed toward fake Mira. She was facing away from him, her attention on Jace. Carnag tromped over to that cage and raised a foot above it.

“Last chance,” fake Mira warned.

“Don’t give in,” Jace demanded bravely.

Running hard, Cole unclasped the shawl. Quima watched Jace’s cage. So did Mira. So did fake Mira.

“Mmmmpfh,” Mira said, pointing at her gag.

“Fine,” fake Mira said. “Last chance. But if I don’t like what you have to say . . .”

She waved a hand and the gag vanished again.

Cole reached fake Mira and wrapped the shawl around her shoulders from behind hurriedly, clasping it with nervous fingers. Fake Mira looked over her shoulder at him, her expression perplexed.

“Okay, Miracle,” Cole said. “I need you to lie down.”

Miracle immediately squatted and stretched out on the ground.

Heart hammering from his sprint and his desperation, Cole stared in stunned relief. He could hardly believe it was working! Not wanting to lose

momentum, and trying to sound casual, he continued, “Carnag needs to carefully step back.”

Carnag took a step away from Jace’s cage.

Quima rushed at Cole, her eyes brimming with rage. Twitch slammed into her from behind, both of them tumbling to the ground. Liam landed nearby, waved a hand, and ropes bound Quima. A gag covered her mouth. Eyes bulging, Quima jackknifed frantically.

“Miracle,” Cole said kindly. “All of Carnag should lie down. Gently, though.”

The giant mishmash of objects and substances crouched down, then spread out on the field on its back. The people inside the cages clung to the bars as their floors became walls.

“Very good,” Cole said. “Now open a way out for the captives. Once they’re clear, I’m going to ask you to part yourself from that big body. You’ll cut that little cord that connects you to all that junk and just be our size.”

Before he had finished talking, Carnag’s cages dissolved. Jace’s cage evaporated. Mira’s cage disintegrated as well, and her chains fell away. On the ground nearby, Quima squirmed, desperately trying to make her stifled protests heard.

Eyes shining, Mira hurried over to Cole. “You can get up now, Miracle,” Cole instructed. “Just your normal-size self. Let the big Carnag part of you stay on the ground.”

With the tendril still in her back, fake Mira got to her feet. Legionnaires and other prisoners poured out of Carnag.

“Everybody out!” Cole called. “Everyone back away!” He watched to make sure the cells were empty.

“Looks good,” Liam said.

“Go ahead and disconnect from that big body,” Cole suggested.

There was a pause, and fake Mira’s lip twitched upward in a sneer. Then the tendril fell from fake Mira’s back.

“The cloak is smoking,” Twitch whispered.

He was right. Wisps of steam or smoke were rising from the shawl. Cole stood near enough to feel the heat. Despite this, fake Mira showed no discomfort. In fact, she looked serene.

“Miracle,” Cole said hurriedly. “Your power actually belongs to Mira. The real Miracle. It needs to return to her. Give Mira her powers back.”

“Oh wow,” Mira said, her voice choked with emotion. “It’s coming fast. I can feel it.”

Fake Mira pivoted to face the real one. Anger ignited in fake Mira’s eyes. Then her face contorted in hate, and her body quivered. The shawl smoked heavily and burst into flames.

“How dare you!” the fake Mira screamed, wheeling on Cole, her gaze promising murder.

With a wave of her hand, Mira sent the flaming shawl fluttering off to one side. “Miracle!” Mira commanded, her eyes intense. “Don’t blame him. I think you’re just angry with yourself.”

Baring her teeth in a sneering grimace, fake Mira turned and charged the real one. Mira held up a hand, and fake Mira stopped short and started

floating a little, her arms and legs spreading unnaturally wide. Mira glared at her duplicate, jaw clenched, sweat beading on her brow.

“What are you doing?” fake Mira asked, her voice strained.

“Taking what’s mine,” Mira said. She spread her hands apart, and fake Mira tore in half with a burst of light. When the flash was gone, so was all evidence of Mira’s semblance.



## CHAPTER

# 34

## QUIMA

**M**ira dropped to her knees. She stared at Cole with wide eyes.

“You did that?” Cole asked.

Mira nodded and let out a shocked giggle.

“She’s gone?” Cole asked. “It worked?”

Mira nodded again. “I got a big dose of my power back before she turned on us. Suddenly I could sense her tangible form more clearly than ever, brittle and false, but with so much energy boiling inside. Energy that belonged to me. I had the strongest urge to release it.”

“You released it, all right,” Twitch said with a nervous laugh.

“It worked,” Liam confirmed. “Carnag is gone. I sense none of her presence.”

“I can feel my power,” Mira said. “It’s been so long. At the same time . . . it’s incredibly familiar. Like I only lost it yesterday.”

Liam glided over to where the former prisoners had gathered after exiting Carnag. “Move along,” he announced from his floating disk. “You need to go

find the people trapped in Carnag's stronghold. The nearest road is that way. Nothing to see here. Smartest policy might be to pretend none of this ever happened."

Cole doubted whether anybody would be able to forget what happened, but the freed captives started trudging away. The giant form of the fallen Carnag lay inert, not disappearing like fake Mira, but utterly lifeless, no longer anything more than a baffling heap of random debris.

"What do we do with Quima?" Jace asked, standing over her.

"I have some questions for her," Liam said, returning. "I want a little more privacy first."

His posture uncomfortable, Jace glanced at Cole. "Thanks. You really bailed us out."

"Thank Liam," Cole said. "Thank Mira. Without them, we wouldn't have had a chance."

Liam shook his head. "I helped. But Carnag's power was much more than I could have defeated. Mira was amazing. But without your quick thinking, Cole, I don't think any of us would have survived."

"You really were a lifesaver," Mira said.

Cole tried not to blush. The temperature of his face implied that he was failing.

The nearest of the departing captives was now hundreds of yards away and getting farther with every step. "All right," Liam said. "Let's talk to Quima."

The gag disappeared from her mouth. "You have no idea what you're tangling with," Quima spat. "Today you crossed the wrong woman."

Liam shook his head. "I'm not sure that's the lesson here. I think you crossed the wrong girl."

"Think what you like," Quima said. "Mira has only delayed her ruin. This was one small piece of a much larger puzzle."

"Not surprising," Liam said. "I want to hear more about shapecraft."

Quima's smile was both knowing and taunting all at once. "Grant me permission, and I'll show you."

"Considering what happened to Mira, I'm going to decline," Liam said. "I've worked with some knowledgeable shapers, but I've never heard of shapecraft."

"After meeting Carnag, you've had a lesson," Quima said. "I think that's enough for today. Those who practice shapecraft have done so quietly for longer than you can guess. Our time is nearing. You'll learn plenty before long. Be warned—what you don't know can hurt you."

"Does my father practice shapecraft?" Mira asked.

"To an extent," Quima said.

"Did he have help taking my powers?"

Quima paused, eyes narrow. "There is more to my order than you can imagine, Miracle. Without us, your father would be the least competent in a long line of High Shapers."

"Who helped him?" Mira asked.

"You'll learn nothing more from me," Quima said. "Mira, I'm no less dedicated to my cause than you are to yours. Let me show you how it's done." Closing her eyes, she made a tight fist.

"What do you mean?" Liam asked.

Quima opened her hand, revealing a pinprick of blood on her palm. “My ring hid a poisoned needle.”

“You’d have to be careful with one of those,” Liam said.

“I’ll be dead in minutes,” Quima promised. “No matter what methods you might have to extract what I know, they won’t work before I’m well out of reach.”

“You may be right,” Liam said. “But surely you’ll share some last thoughts. Some dying hints. You don’t want to go out with a fizzle.”

Quima gave a wide, evil grin. “If you wish. Carnag was weak. It was weak because it was docile. With a little more time, I could have overcome that tendency. The others will not be as frail.”

“What others?” Mira asked. “Is this happening to all my sisters?”

“That won’t be a mystery for long,” Quima said. “They have distinct shaping styles. Their powers will take form differently. None will be as pathetic as yours. And the semblances that arise from your sisters are only the beginning.”

“What will come after?” Liam asked.

“You’ll know when it arrives,” Quima said. “Assuming you’re still alive.”

“I feel whole,” Mira said. “My father no longer has a share of my power.”

Quima shook her head, as if Mira was missing the point. “Your father is the least of your problems. But even Stafford has not yet outlived his usefulness. His talents wane, but his authority remains. And he stole powers once . . .”

Cole felt a surge of fear. “My friends! The High King was looking for slaves with shaping powers.”

Throwing her head back, Quima laughed grandly. The genuine delight gave Cole chills. “You have friends among his slaves? Friends with shaping talent? They will learn of shapecraft. The experiments reserved for them may teach us all new lessons.”

“What experiments?” Cole asked, fear flaring into anger.

Quima shook her head.

“Tell him what you know,” Liam said.

“Or what?” Quima laughed. “You’ll kill me? Too late. You’ll get no more from me.”

“What about your part in this?” Liam asked. “Carnag. Did you form it with your shapecraft?”

“The power became a semblance because of shapecraft,” Quima said. “All part of a larger plan than you could possibly guess. Its creation wasn’t my doing, but I helped steer Carnag in the right direction.”

“Did you steer it with shapecraft?” Liam asked. “Or with counsel?”

“Use your imagination,” Quima said.

“But you were planning to take control of it?” Mira asked.

“I had control!” Quima said. “I should have taken full control.”

“That would have required Mira’s compliance?” Liam asked.

“No, I was just being polite,” Quima said. “We’re done. I fell short of my aims and failed my order. It is a small failure, inconsequential in the long run, but I’m ready to pay for it. Any second the symptoms of the poison will start.”

“Yeah,” Liam said. “About that . . . I shaped your poison. I’m really good at analyzing substances. And changing them. I’m rather amazing, actually.

You stabbed yourself with honey. If your palm could taste, it would have been delicious.”

Cole couldn't resist laughing at the stunned look on her face. Jace joined in, and even Twitch covered a snicker.

“Impossible,” Quima retorted breathlessly.

“For some shapers, maybe,” Liam said. “Kind of routine for me. My boss will really want to talk to you, so I'm going to make sure you don't harm yourself in the near future.”

He waved a hand, and a golden strip of fabric emerged from the ground and bound itself around her mouth. She strained against the cords that held her.

“I know you like hiding in private rooms, so I'll give you one,” Liam said. Quima sank into the ground as if it were quicksand. Liam glanced at Mira. “Now we can really talk. Don't worry, I'm putting her deep.”

“What are you going to do with her?” Cole asked.

“Like I promised, I'll take her to Declan,” Liam replied. “He'll be very interested to speak with her.”

“Do you think you can find out what the High King wants to do to my friends?” Cole asked.

“Hard to guess,” Liam said. “Declan may have the best chance.”

“Maybe he wants their power,” Mira said.

“That's what I thought at first,” Cole said. “But Quima made it sound like there was more to it.”

“She may have been trying to scare us,” Liam said. “Everything she told us could have been a lie.”

“I have a feeling it’s not just a bluff,” Mira said.

“Me too,” Liam said. “We’ll see what Declan can get out of her.”

“He’s safe?” Mira asked.

“Safe enough,” Liam said. “We had to leave most of what he built behind. Lyrus couldn’t come with us, so we left him in charge of the defense of Cloudvale. I’ve never seen him happier. The legion will have a very unpleasant job ahead of them. It’s possible that once they confirm we’ve fled, they’ll retreat.”

“What now?” Mira asked.

Liam glanced at the sky and looked around. “We find Bertram, send your captured legionnaire on his way, then wait for Joe to catch up. He had a message for you that he wouldn’t share with me.”

“Any hints?” Mira asked.

“I expect it’s important.”

## THE MESSAGE

**C**ole hunched on a stool outside of a beautiful cottage. A soft wind carried the scent of leaves and wildflowers. The autocoach waited nearby, Bertram sitting contentedly inside.

After traveling a considerable distance from where Carnag had fallen, Liam and Mira had shaped the cottage in less than an hour, complete with beds, furniture, a big fireplace, paintings on the walls, and a garden out back. This was the second afternoon after the cottage had risen.

Cole could not stop worrying about his friends. When Liam had moved Quima to a new underground cell near the cottage, she had refused to respond to any inquiry. With her blank expression and her dazed manner, she had seemed unreachable.

Lacking further information, all Cole could do was wonder and fret about Dalton and Jenna. If the High King took their shaping power, he would have to keep them alive, or the power would be lost, right? Would it bother his friends to lose their power if they only had it briefly? Or was the problem



something else? Quima had referred to experiments. Given all that shaping could accomplish, the experiments could involve almost anything.

Mira and Liam had shared vague assurances that they would help, but, really, they were all waiting. They needed more information.

Fluttering down from the sky, Mango landed near the cottage door. Cole got off the stool. "What is it?"

"I need to tell Mira that a rider approaches," the bird announced.

"Is it Joe?" Cole asked.

"Of course, silly. I'm not raising an alarm!"

By the time Cole had retrieved Mira, Liam, Jace, and Twitch from inside the cottage, they could hear hoofbeats. Cole clung to a faint hope that Mira's messenger might reveal something about how he could help Jenna and Dalton.

Before long the horseman rode into view. He cantered across the field to them and dismounted. Cole recognized the man who had come to Skyport just before the legionnaires arrived, his whiskers longer, his leather jacket further dulled by dust. Joe pointed at the cottage. "Looks like you've settled in!"

Liam shrugged. "It's far from any convenient roads."

"I saw Carnag," Joe said. "What was left of it. Thanks for waiting. Glad I could help."

Liam lifted his hands apologetically. "Did you notice any legionnaires on the road?"

"That was only part of the fun!" Joe exclaimed. "Do you know how hard I rode to get here? I galloped through the night, trading horses, spending

money like a compulsive gambler, and using every trick I knew.”

“Mira, meet Joe MacFarland,” Liam said. “Joe, this is Miracle Pemberton. These three boys are her friends.”

Joe gave a respectful bow. “I’m at your service, Your Highness.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mira said uncomfortably. “Just call me Mira, please.”

“Whatever you prefer,” Joe said. “I’m glad to find you safe.”

“I’m glad you’re safe too,” Mira said. “Thank you for trying to warn me about the legion back at Skyport. Was there more to your message?”

Joe glanced at Liam. “I learned about the legionnaires while on my way to find you. The message regarded other matters.”

Mira looked surprised. “What?”

Joe looked from Cole to Jace to Twitch. “I was supposed to take you and Durny to confront Carnag. If we succeeded, we had a second assignment. It concerns one of your sisters. Would you rather I tell you in private?”

Mira paled and rubbed her lips with both hands. “I haven’t had direct word about my sisters since we all parted. Are they all right?”

“This only involves one of them,” Joe said. “She’s in trouble.”

Mira faced the boys. “Then this is up to you. I can’t begin to thank you for getting me out of Skyport and coming here with me. It went beyond my wildest hopes. If you want to leave, now is the time. I won’t take it personally. We’re out of immediate danger. I expect this news will mean traveling to another kingdom.”

Joe nodded. “Since we’re among friends, I’ll reveal that responding to this message would mean going to Elloweer.”

“I’m with you, Mira,” Jace said. “I told you to stop trying to get rid of me. Although I’m not sure my rope will work well outside of Sambria.”

“It’s very powerful,” Liam said. “But outside of Sambria or maybe Junction, it will barely function, if at all. Other shaping disciplines govern the other kingdoms. Almost all Sambrian renderings would become inert. In Elloweer, shapers are called enchanters, and their abilities are mostly foreign to me.”

“I’ll be less useful,” Jace said. “But I’m willing. Where else would I go?”

“You’re free now,” Mira said. “You could build a life. With that rope alone, you could go far here in Sambria.”

“Any of you would be welcome to join me,” Liam said. “Our new hiding place should remain secure for some time. We could certainly make use of you. And I wouldn’t mind company with the chore of transporting Quima.”

“Would you rather get rid of me?” Jace asked Mira, almost timidly.

“I want you to do what you want,” she said. “Staying with me will definitely lead to trouble. Maybe even death.”

“Then count me in,” Jace said. “I’ve had so much trouble in my life, I’m not sure what I’d do without it.”

“I haven’t told you everything about me,” Twitch said. “I left Elloweer with a purpose. My people are in danger. Slavery was an unplanned detour. I have to go back and see what I can do. So I can join you for at least part of the journey. But maybe I should avoid hearing details, because I might have to eventually part ways.”

“Whatever you’d prefer,” Mira said.

Twitch hopped away, wings fluttering. He only stopped once he had given them plenty of space.

When Mira looked at Cole, he had never felt more like a hero. She stepped toward him and gave him a big hug, which he returned. “Your friends need you,” she said. “I wish we had a better idea what they’re up against.” Releasing him, Mira stepped back.

“What friends?” Joe asked.

“My friends who came here as slaves from my world,” Cole said. “Some had shaping talent and were sold to the High King.”

“Slaves who can shape?” Joe asked. “Do you know their specialties?”

“No,” Cole said. “But the High King may want them for experiments.”

Joe rubbed his jaw. “The High Shaper has been sending his slaves with shaping talent all over the five kingdoms. They’re going into training wherever their talents are strongest.”

“Since when?” Mira asked.

“For the past several weeks,” Joe said.

Liam scrunched his face in disappointment. “That means your friends could be anywhere.”

Cole felt deflated. Joe’s news meant he knew less than he had previously believed. “Including Junction City,” Cole realized. “They might not have gone with the slaves sent for training. They could be part of something else.”

“Entirely possible,” Joe said. “But I do know that the High Shaper has been acquiring slaves with shaping talent wherever he can find them and sending them to be trained all over the Outskirts.”

“We’ll help you find them,” Mira said, rubbing Cole’s shoulder. “I promised to help you. I haven’t forgotten.”

Joe looked a little uncomfortable. “You may be needed elsewhere, Mira. At least in the short term.”

“There are ways we can investigate,” Liam assured Cole. “The five kingdoms are large, but we aren’t without allies. I’ll give you all the help at my disposal. You could come with me and wait, or I could probably figure out a way to contact you if you’d rather stay with Mira.”

Cole frowned. “Thanks. Right now information is what I need most. I can’t really help my friends until I know where they went. In the meanwhile, I’ll stick with Mira.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“They’re as likely to be in Elloweer as anywhere,” Cole said.

Mira hugged him tightly. Cole tried to avoid eye contact with Jace. “I’d hate to lose you. You saved us back there. You saved me. Cole, if I live forever, I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

“I couldn’t believe it worked,” Cole said. “I thought it was a long shot.”

“It was,” Liam said. “If Mira hadn’t planted a lot of doubt in Carnag, and if the essence of Carnag wasn’t eager to rejoin Mira, I don’t think it would have succeeded. The shawl was a potent tool, but not strong enough to harness something like Carnag—not unless she was already pretty conflicted.”

“Anyway,” Cole said to Mira, “until I have a clear idea where to find Dalton or Jenna, I’m coming with you. Without a plan, or at least someplace to go, I can’t imagine leaving you. I’d be utterly alone.”

“Ouch,” Liam said.

“Not if I went with you,” Cole hurriedly clarified. “Which I would do, except . . . I’ve lost enough friends already. I don’t want to lose any more.”

“Ouch again!” Liam said. “Seriously, stop talking.”

Cole gave an embarrassed laugh. “I don’t want to lose you either, Liam, but you’re heading off to a hideout. I need to keep moving. And I want to help Mira.”

“In that case, I’ll contact you if I learn something,” Liam said.

“I’d appreciate it,” Cole said.

“Go ahead and give us the message,” Mira prompted.

“As you can probably guess, this concerns Honor,” Joe said. “Her shaping was always strongest in Elloweer. Your mother fears that her protector is dead and that she has been captured. I was going to take you and Durny to try to help her.”

“How would we find her?” Mira asked.

“Her star is in the sky,” Joe said. “I know how to recognize it. Just as I know yours.”

“I can’t believe it,” Mira said. “I haven’t seen Nori in so many years. I’m surprised she’s in trouble. I can much more easily picture her rescuing me.”

“The message had few details,” Joe said. “We’ll only learn more by following her star.”

“When do we start?” Jace asked.

“As soon as you choose,” Liam said. “It’ll mean going our separate ways for now.”

Mira sighed. “I had hoped that getting my powers back would mean the end of my troubles for a while.”

“Not yet,” Cole said. “But we hurt your dad. And we’ll hurt him more. The best way to help my friends will be to bring him down.”

“No problem,” Jace said. “We’ll take out the High King. Twitch will love that. We should tell him.”

“We won’t beat the High King tomorrow,” Cole said. “Probably not the next day either. But helping Honor will be a good place to start.”

“This may not stop with the High King,” Liam warned. “We also have to worry about Quima’s group of shapecrafters.”

“No,” Cole said. “They need to worry about us.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My books do not happen through my efforts alone. Writing and promoting my books take me away from my family more than I prefer. I thank them for their support and patience. My wife, Mary, and my eldest daughter, Sadie, also read my books and provide feedback. Mary is always my first editor and her reactions to my chapters proved very useful once again.

I also have professional help. As he has done before, my agent, Simon Lipskar, shared some sage insights that helped me really bring this story into focus. Liesa Abrams, my editor, did a superb job with feedback as well, even though she was approaching the due date for a child. Fiona Simpson gets a big thank you for stepping in when Liesa had her son. (Congrats, Liesa!)

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I owe thanks to Brandon Flowers and the Killers for letting me use a line from one of their more poignant songs at the start of this book. I thought the line really fit the story, and am grateful they granted permission to use it.

Finally, I owe huge thanks to you, the reader! The books of mine that you read, share, and buy let me do this for a living. Without your support, I'd still be writing on the side, and there would be far fewer stories. Thanks for taking the time to go on this adventure. There are four more books coming, and you'll soon see that things are just getting started. I'm excited to share more of this series. Read the note that follows for more on that.

## NOTE TO READERS



One down, five to go. I'm happy that you've been introduced to one of the Five Kingdoms. Just wait until you see where the story goes in the coming books! I don't think I've ever planned a series with as much variety as you'll find in this one. If you liked this first book, get ready for a great ride. I'll keep them coming as quickly as I can. Books Two and Three should come out within a year.

Because my writing schedule is packed, and because I go on book tours a lot, and because I have four kids, I can be hard to reach. If a letter or e-mail has gone unanswered, please accept my apology. If you sent it, I probably got it, but I'm an absentminded, disorganized person, and I've fallen way behind in responding. I still hope to get caught up one day. I save the messages I get, and randomly respond to as many as I can manage.

If you want to be in contact with me, I suggest following me on Twitter (@brandonmull) or my author page (Brandon Mull) on Facebook. I routinely post in those places, so you can get news if you want it, and posting comments there sometimes leads to responses. You can also try emailing me at [autumnal-solace@gmail.com](mailto:autumnal-solace@gmail.com) (an address that comes from one of my Fablehaven books). Whether or not you get an answer is a roll of the dice.

I hope that someday I'll figure out a system that will let me respond to everyone without neglecting my job and my family. If it is any consolation, part of the reason I am disorganized about practical things is because my mind spends a lot of time making up stories. So if nothing else, at least I can communicate with you through my crazy books. And if you really want to meet me, just keep an eye on my tour schedule at [brandonmull.com](http://brandonmull.com). Whenever a new book comes out, I hit the road and have many events around the United States.

For those of you who have just discovered me, here is a quick guide to my other books:

Fablehaven is a five book series, and probably my most balanced, with a good mix of adventure, humor, and discovery. It deals with secret wildlife parks for magical creatures, and the overall feel is probably the closest fit to my Five Kingdoms series. I have plans to start a sequel series to Fablehaven around 2016.

Beyonders is three books long, and is my most epic series. It starts out kind of weird and mysterious, then builds into a grand story about heroes trying to save an imperiled world. You'll meet creatures and magical races you've never read about before, and I think the ending of book three is my biggest finale so far.

Candy Shop War is lighter than my other stuff, but full of imagination. It happens in a normal neighborhood with normal kids. Magicians come to town sharing magical candy that can give people powers. When it turns out some of the magicians are up to no good, things get interesting. There are two books in that series so far. Both feel like complete stories, without any real cliffhangers.

Spirit Animals is a series I created. Readers will discover a world called Erdas, where kids and animals can sometimes form powerful bonds. It is my fastest-paced story, and maybe my best for readers who are just getting used to a thick book. Though I outlined the whole series, I only wrote book one. Six other authors will write the six other books.

And lastly, if you're into picture books, I have two Pingo books about a boy named Chad and his imaginary friend. You can find more about all of my books at [brandonmull.com](http://brandonmull.com).

If you made it all the way to the end of this, congratulations for finishing what you started. Thanks for reading. See you in the Outskirts!



**Brandon Mull** is the author of the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling *Beyonders* and *Fablehaven* series. He resides in Utah, in a happy little valley near the mouth of a canyon, with his wife and four children. Brandon's greatest regret is that he has but one life to give for Gondor.

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*Secrets of the Dragon Sanctuary*

*Keys to the Demon Prison*

### **Candy Shop War**

*The Candy Shop War*

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This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



## ALADDIN

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# FIVE KINGDOMS

ROGUE KNIGHT



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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF THE FABLEHAVEN AND BEYONDERS SERIES

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ALADDIN

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THEY COULD ALL BE FOR MARY.  
HERE IS ANOTHER.



*We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.*

—Kurt Vonnegut



## CHAPTER

# 1

# AUTOCOACH

**I**t took some time before Cole noticed that the autocoach was going faster than usual. Mira, Jace, Twitch, and Joe had fallen asleep shortly after nightfall. Despite the darkness and the rhythmic trotting of the huge four-legged brick pulling the coach, Cole had failed to relax enough to sleep.

They had been progressing toward Elloweer for many days now. Mira was so excited to see her sister that Cole sometimes wondered if she remembered that Honor was in peril. Twitch remained quiet and content, not speaking much unless asked direct questions. Joe spent most of his time focused on the possible dangers of the road. Jace grew more cranky and restless with each passing day. Cole couldn't blame him.

The travel conditions helped explain Cole's current insomnia—too many hours confined within the autocoach, getting little exercise and napping whenever he wanted. The days and nights blurred together, making it tricky to keep a regular schedule.

As he sat in the dark while the others slept, the reality of his circumstances confronted him. Until a few weeks ago, Cole had lived a normal life as a sixth grader in Mesa, Arizona. Then one trip to a neighborhood haunted house on Halloween had landed Cole and his friends in the Outskirts, a mysterious realm made up of five kingdoms that each contained distinct forms of magic.

As if getting stuck in another world wasn't terrible enough, all the kids who had traveled with Cole to the Outskirts had been branded as slaves the second they arrived.

After a failed attempt to rescue his friends, Cole became separated from the others when he was sold to the Sky Raiders, a group of scavengers who salvaged valuable items from dangerous castles in the sky. He had no clue where any of his friends from Arizona had ended up, including his best friend, Dalton, and Jenna, the girl he'd had a crush on for years. He knew they were somewhere in the five kingdoms, and he was determined to rescue them. But sometimes the task of finding them felt impossible.

The only bright spot for Cole was the new friends he'd made in the Outskirts—including Jace, Twitch, and Mira, fellow Sky Raiders who had escaped with him. Joe had come to warn Mira of danger, and later had joined them. Cole felt that sticking with Mira was important. She had connections across Elloweer that made travel easier and that might help him find leads about his friends. Of course that meant facing a lot of danger in the meantime, since Mira was on the run from an incredibly powerful evil ruler who just happened to be her father, the High Shaper who had proclaimed himself High King. Having stolen Mira's power once, he wanted her abilities back, and after seeing firsthand what that power could do, Cole understood why.

Since arriving in the Outskirts, Cole had flirted with death several times—while scouting sky castles, escaping Skyport, and battling his way through a dreamlike land created by some magical kid. And there was no foreseeable end to the danger. How many near misses could he expect to survive?

Home felt a million miles away. The actual distance was probably even worse. From all appearances, the Outskirts existed in a whole separate universe.

But Cole was here in Sambria, one of the five kingdoms, and that wasn't changing anytime soon, so all he could do was focus on their next goal.

Mira's mother had used her shaping talent to place a star in the sky above Honor, which meant Mira's sister was in trouble, but they had no other details. Not long ago, Mira's power had taken tangible form, and defeating it had nearly cost them their lives. Were they now heading toward a similar

battle? They had no idea what threat Honor could be facing, but Mira was determined to rescue her.

Bertram, the coachman, slouched forward on his bench, eyes on the floor, elderly features blank. As a semblance created by shaping, he didn't need sleep, but he wasn't designed to provide much company. He sometimes shared useful information about their route. According to Bertram, they would reach the border of Elloweer tomorrow morning.

The autocoach usually provided a smooth ride, so when it jostled over two rough patches in succession, Cole began to pay attention. The *clip-clop* of the trotting brick sounded faster than he had ever heard it. Then the rhythm of the trot changed to one of a loping stride, and the speed of the autocoach increased even more.

Neither animal nor machine, the autocoach had been created by shapers. It never tired, but it never went fast, either. Cole tapped Bertram. "Why are we speeding up?"

The old man looked at him, lips quivering, one eye twitching. Bertram only spoke to share information about the roads ahead or to assure anyone who cared to listen that he was on holiday with his grandniece and grandnephews. Though his replies weren't always relevant, he had never failed to respond to a question.

"Guys!" Cole yelled. "Something's wrong!"

Joe's soft snoring sputtered to a halt. He squinted at Cole. "Is the coach *running*?"

"Yes," Cole said. "And Bertram won't talk."

The old semblance wore a pained expression. One hand clenched sporadically.

Joe hastily shook Mira and Jace. "Wake up!"

Twitch sat up with a start. "What's happening?" he asked.

The brick's pace increased to a pounding gallop. The autocoach rattled and creaked, then jolted over a sharp bump, jarring Cole's spine.

Jace produced his golden rope, the magical item he obtained when he worked for the Sky Raiders. Mira reached for the Jumping Sword that their

friend Liam had made for her before returning to the Grand Shaper of Sambria.

Joe slapped Bertram briskly across the cheek. “Bertram! Slow us down! Stop the coach!”

“Halt the coach, Bertram,” Mira demanded.

Face contorted, Bertram’s lips peeled back as he ground his teeth. Drool leaked down his chin.

“Stop us, Bertram,” Joe insisted. “Stop us now!”

Rocking from side to side, Bertram screamed. The wretched, desperate cry filled Cole with panic. What could make the calm old semblance behave like this?

If anything, the autocoach gained speed.

“Should we bail?” Twitch asked, slipping on his Ellowine ring to reveal his semitransparent wings and grasshopper legs.

“What about our stuff?” Jace asked.

“You kids go,” Joe instructed. “Use your renderings to land softly. I’ll stay with the coach to see where—”

His instructions were cut off as the autocoach launched into the air. For a moment, gravity disappeared. Cole was floating, as were the others. They all came crashing down when the coach landed thunderously, slanted steeply forward as it plunged down a sharp incline.

Cole ended up on his back with Twitch on top of him. The autocoach quaked as it skipped out of control down the slope. Before Cole could sit up, the coach went airborne again, tilting sharply to the right.

Jace’s golden rope suddenly expanded, zigzagging around the inside of the compartment in a complex pattern. The autocoach landed on its side and tumbled wildly, flinging Cole and his friends against yielding lengths of golden rope. The elaborate tangle cushioned their movements and kept them from slamming against the interior walls of the coach. Cole lost all sense of direction as he flopped between segments of rope, the coach whirling and shattering around him.

The autocoach came to a rest upside down. For a moment, the occupants hung suspended like bugs in a spiderweb. The stillness and silence was eerie

after the chaotic crash. Then the rope web slackened, and they dropped to the ceiling. Cole felt loopy and sore.

“Get out,” Joe whispered urgently. “This was an attack. It’s not over. We need to move.”

The door had been torn from one mangled side of the coach. Twitch ducked through and into the darkness beyond. Jace shrank his rope to its normal length and exited as well. Mira went next, followed by Cole. Joe came last.

The autocoach had settled at the bottom of an earthy ravine that was spanned by a bridge. Dim moonlight revealed steep, brushy banks sloping up on either side, and a stream, crawling down the middle, narrow enough to step across. The rocks, branches, and warped old logs littering the bottom of the ravine suggested that sometimes the stream rose higher than its current trickle.

Cole took a deep breath of the night air. It definitely beat the odor of six bodies crammed in close confines day after day. Since they had started their journey to Elloweer, he had only left the coach to relieve himself and occasionally to eat at a roadside inn.

Jace pressed a finger to his lips and pointed at the top of the ravine. A pair of caped, armored figures was descending the slope, one astride a huge jungle cat, the other riding what appeared to be a writhing mass of rags. The intimidating mounts glided down the incline with slinky grace.

Crouching low, Cole held his breath. The last few days had been quiet, but he knew Mira’s father had people hunting them. When Mira defeated the semblance monster Carnag and regained her shaping power, the High Shaper had lost all claim to her stolen abilities. With the power he took from her other sisters fading, the High Shaper would be in a panic.

The sinister riders didn’t look like legionnaires or city guardsmen. Could they be Enforcers? Cole had heard warnings about the High Shaper’s secret police, but had no way of knowing if these riders were affiliated with them. Whoever they were, the sight of them gave Cole chills. In a land where reality could be reshaped, he had learned to accept the impossible, but that didn’t mean he liked it trying to hunt him down.

Without saying a word, the small group headed in different directions: Twitch slithered behind a log, Mira crouched behind a bush, and Jace melted into the shadows behind a rock pile. Joe ducked back into the damaged compartment. Cole crept around the autococh, putting it between himself and the oncoming figures, which still let him peek around it to keep an eye on them. The duo advanced with little effort at subtlety. Cole realized they probably assumed the crash had left all occupants of the carriage incapacitated or dead. If not for Jace's rope, they would be right.

Cole considered retrieving his Jumping Sword from the coach. With a fight brewing, he hated to be weaponless. But he worried about the noise spoiling their chance to surprise the oncoming riders. Both were almost to the floor of the ravine.

Squinting, Cole tried to make sense of the squirming jumble of rags. The ragbeast glided along on tattered wisps of fabric, hovering more than walking. Though not very substantial, and lacking a clear shape, it seemed to support the rider without difficulty.

Joe sidled up next to him and quietly handed Cole his Jumping Sword. "Lay low if you can," Joe whispered in his ear. He held up a bow—a shaped weapon Cole had retrieved from a sky castle and that produced an arrow every time the string was drawn. "I'm borrowing this. Top priority is getting Mira away from here."

Bow in hand, Joe slunk away from the totaled autococh. He stepped over the small stream and took cover in some tall brush.

Staying low, Cole peeked as the riders prowled along the base of the ravine. They advanced straight toward the autococh. Of course! They meant to search the wreckage! Why hadn't he picked a different hiding place?

Keeping the inverted autococh between himself and the riders, Cole backed away, crouching, Jumping Sword held ready. If they spotted him, he would use the sword to flee up the slope. Maybe he could draw them away from the others. Even with their strange mounts, the Jumping Sword might give him a chance to outrun them.

One foot stepped into the stream, making a little splash. Cole froze.



The big cat gave an angry yowl. Cole cringed, gritting his teeth. Beyond the coach, Cole could see Twitch had risen skyward, oversize dragonfly wings shimmering in the moonlight.

Twitch had been spotted.

Cole shuffled sideways in time to see Jace's golden rope whip around the rider on the jungle cat. The rope hoisted the armored figure high into the air, then slammed him down on a rocky patch of the streambed with a resounding clang.

The ragbeast wheeled toward Jace. Mira sprang out of hiding, flying through the air, Jumping Sword extended. Her blade struck the ragbeast's rider in the side, knocking him to the ground without piercing his armor. Mira tumbled to the nearby creek bed, her sword falling from her grasp.

The huge jungle cat streaked toward Mira. Pointing his sword at a spot ahead of the jungle cat, Cole shouted, "Away!"

The sword pulled Cole through the air on a low trajectory, skimming along just above the ravine's floor. As the big cat pounced at Mira, Cole, backed by the momentum of his flight, plunged his blade into the feline's ribs. The Jumping Sword had slowed just before reaching the target, but even so, Cole drove it deep, then collided with the furry, meaty side of the huge cat. Cole spun through the air and landed on the ground, painfully wrenching his shoulder and scraping his legs.

Twisting to nip at the sword in its side, the jungle cat hissed. Then an arrow hit the big cat in the neck.

"Flail, attack!" Mira called, pointing at the feline.

Accompanied by the crunch of smashed wood, the Shaper's Flail flew out of the wrecked autocoach. Composed of six heavy iron balls joined to a central ring by weighty chains, the flail whirred to the jungle cat, simultaneously pummeling it and wrapping it up. With two legs pinned, the huge feline ended up on its back, hissing and struggling.

The armored rider Mira had unseated was now on his feet clutching a double-bit battle-ax. He clomped toward Cole, weapon raised high. Curling his legs, Cole prepared to lunge away from the downswing of the heavy weapon.

Before he could move, a golden rope lashed the rider's ankles together, jerked him upward, and flung him against a boulder across the ravine. The gigantic jungle cat went still as arrows accumulated.

Jace whipped the ragbeast a couple of times, but the golden rope passed through it without grabbing hold of anything. The attack seemed to spur the tattered mass of fabric into action. After whirling in place for a moment, the ragbeast swished by Cole, doing no more damage than a thrown pile of laundry.

Cole went and retrieved his sword from the big cat, jiggling it to wrench it free. He wiped the blade against the animal's fur.

At the top of the ravine, near the bridge, a horse gave a loud whinny. Cole glanced up in time to see the steed rearing. A rider slid off before both silhouettes moved out of sight.

Wings fluttering, Twitch landed beside Mira. He crouched and helped her to her feet. The ragbeast glided swiftly upstream alongside the trickle of water.

Joe ran over to them, holding an arrow ready against the bowstring. "Mira, get that rider." His bow pointed toward the top of the ravine.

"Flail, attack," Mira ordered. The tangle of balls and chains disengaged from the fallen cat and zoomed up the slope of the ravine. At the top, it paused.

"Flail, attack," Mira repeated, gesturing in the direction the stranger had gone.

The flail hovered benignly.

"I'm trying to picture the rider," Mira said. "He moved out of sight before I really saw him. I think I have to see the target. Should I go up the slope?"

"No," Joe said quietly. "It isn't worth the risk. Can't you command the flail to strike whatever is within range up there?"

"It isn't an attack dog," Mira said. "I have to direct it."

Joe nodded. "I hit the rider's horse with an arrow. I'm not sure how much damage it did. We can't let him escape. He could round up reinforcements. I should go after him."

"How'd they make the autocoach run wild?" Twitch asked.

"They must have reshaped it somehow," Jace said.

“But Declan made the coach,” Mira murmured. “It would take quite a shaper to hijack a Grand Shaper’s work.”

“Might have been shapecraft,” Cole said. “If shapecrafters can mess with the shaping power itself, who knows what else they can do?”

“They organized Mira’s power into Carnag,” Twitch said. “Why couldn’t they tamper with a semblance?”

“Whatever their skills, those were no ordinary soldiers,” Joe said. “You just met some Enforcers. And one of them is getting away. I can’t let that happen. He probably won’t go to the legion or any regular authorities, but there may be others of his kind in the area.”

“We’re splitting up?” Jace asked.

“For now, yes,” Joe said.

“We follow the road?” Twitch checked.

“It will take you to Carthage, on the border between Sambria and Elloweer,” Joe confirmed. “Honor’s star has held steady in that direction. If danger forces you to abandon the road, Mira knows how to follow the star.”

Cole glanced at Mira, who had turned her gaze to the sky. To help guard the precious secret that Mira’s mother could mark the location of her five daughters, only Mira and Joe knew what Honor’s star looked like. If that information ever leaked to the High Shaper, the girls would be doomed.

“Am I just flustered?” Mira asked. “I don’t see it.”

Joe looked skyward in the same direction she was peering. “Oh, no,” he muttered after a tense pause. “You’re right. The star is gone.”

## CHAPTER

# 2

# STARLESS

**“W**hat does that mean?” Mira cried.

Cole felt horrible for her. That star was her one connection to her endangered sister. Mira’s panicked eyes studied the section of sky where the star should be.

“Could mean lots of things,” Joe said, his voice deliberately calm. “Might mean your mom was worried about enemies using the star. Might mean your sister has been rescued.”

“What if it means she’s . . . ?” Mira whispered, covering her mouth.

“I’m sure that isn’t it,” Joe said. “We can’t let this sink us. I have to track down whoever is slipping away. You go to Carthage. There’s a fountain with seven spouts on the Elloweer side. If I don’t catch up to you on the road, look for me there every day at noon. Lay low. If I’m more than three days behind you, I’ll be either dead or captured.” Joe glanced at Cole, Jace, and Twitch. “Watch over her.”

Joe turned and dashed up the hill.

Mira continued to stare at the patch of sky. Following her gaze, Cole saw many stars. But he knew the one she yearned to see was not among them.

“Don’t linger,” Joe called down to them as he charged up the slope. “There’s no telling who else might be headed this way.”

“He’s right,” Twitch said.

“What about our stuff?” Jace asked, dipping his head toward the crippled autococh. “At least the money!”

“Good thought,” Cole said.

“You two grab what you need,” Twitch said. “I’ll get Mira out of sight. We’ll wait for you up the road.”

“Fine, shoo,” Jace said, waving a hand. “You too, Cole, if you want.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Cole told Jace, then glanced at Mira. “See you in a minute.”

Twitch took flight, and Mira used her Jumping Sword to leap halfway up the slope opposite the one Joe had climbed. “Flail, follow,” Mira called, and the weapon obeyed.

His shoulder smarting and his scraped legs sore, Cole crossed to the autococh. No longer harnessed to the coach, the walking brick lay motionless on its side, two of its legs broken off at the thigh.

Cole and Jace reached the opening where the door had been and climbed inside. Bertram lay facedown, his body limp.

“Is he dead?” Jace asked.

Worried that Jace might be right, Cole crouched and shook the elderly coachman’s shoulder. “Are you okay, Bertram?”

The old man stirred and raised his head. “I’m on holiday with my grandniece and my grandnephews.” He gave a small smile. “Nothing to worry about here.”

After climbing to reach the floor of the coach, Jace opened a hatch and several items fell. He jumped down and started rummaging. From outside, Cole heard the faint trickle of the stream.

“You didn’t seem like yourself back there,” Cole said to Bertram. “You screamed.”

The old guy blinked. “I’m no longer a spring chicken. The young must forgive us older gents a little episode from time to time. I’ve been under the weather. I won’t let it ruin our holiday.”

Jace dropped down. “We should go,” he said, backing out of the coach.

Cole held up a finger to tell him to wait. He tried to frame a question in terms that might enable Bertram to respond. “Our holiday is in trouble. The coach went wild and crashed. How will we get to Elloweer now? What happened?”

Bertram gave an uncomfortable chuckle. “The coach did what it had to do.”

“The coach takes orders from Mira,” Cole said. “It doesn’t go fast. What happened?”

“It performed as required,” Bertram said. “So did I.”

“Who gave the order?” Cole asked. “Who changed the autocoach?”

Bertram looked unperturbed. “You youngsters may have to go ahead without me for now. The coach is in poor repair. Might do me some good to rest here for a time. This holiday has worn me out! Every uncle has his limits.”

“Come on,” Jace urged. “I grabbed the money and some food.”

“Bye, Bertram,” Cole said. “Thanks for the holiday.”

Bertram gave a nod. “You’re a fine grandnephew.”

Cole stepped out of the autocoach.

“Are those tears?” Jace asked.

Cole wiped his eyes and glanced away. “No.”

“He isn’t real,” Jace said. “He’s a semblance. He was constructed.”

Cole sighed. “That almost makes it worse. He’ll just sit there thinking he’s supposed to be on vacation with us.”

“He’s not thinking,” Jace said. “He just blabs the kind of stuff Declan taught him to say. Don’t be sad for him. Just be sad we lost our ride. Let’s go find Mira.”

“What about the guys you took out with your rope?” Cole asked. “Should we check if they’re alive?”

“No chance,” Jace said. “They tried to kill us. I didn’t hold back.”

“They had armor.”

“Armor won’t protect you from falling off a cliff. I threw them hard. Joe wasn’t worried about them.”

“Joe was in a hurry,” Cole pointed out.

Jace exhaled sharply. “Fine. You take that one.” He pointed toward the man closest to them. Jace’s rope coiled like a spring, then uncoiled, launching him over to where the farthest of the two fallen riders had been thrown. The rope coiled ahead of him to soften his landing.

Cole trotted over to the other rider. The front of his helmet and breastplate were badly dented from the impact with the boulder. The figure didn’t move. Cole knelt beside him and put his ear by the helmet, listening for breathing. He heard nothing.

“Die!” a voice said as hands grabbed Cole by the shoulders from behind.

Cole jumped and turned, startled enough to make Jace laugh.

“The other guy is no longer with us,” Jace said. “We’re wasting time. Let’s fly.”

His rope coiled again, and Jace shot up the slope. Cole pointed his sword, spoke the command, and whooshed upward.

No matter how many times Cole did it, jumping with the sword remained exhilarating, partly because he always felt a little out of control. Landing tended to be the trickiest part. Cole had learned that if he immediately took another sword-assisted jump instead of coming to a full stop, the impact was greatly reduced. So he strung together some jumps up the slope, over to the bridge, and along the road until he saw Twitch and Mira waving at him from up ahead.

Pointing his blade at a spot near his friends, Cole shouted the command again and flew through the air toward them. The sword slowed him at the last second, but not enough to prevent him from stumbling to his knees on the dirt road.

While bounding with the sword, Cole had passed Jace, who was using his rope to grab trees beside the road and slingshot himself forward. Jace caught up by the time Cole rose to his feet.

“You need to practice those landings,” Jace said.

“You need to work on your speed,” Cole shot back.

Jace gestured toward the side of the road. “What’s that supposed to be?”

Cole turned to see a misshapen brown lump the height of his waist rocking back and forth on two uneven legs. Perhaps sensing the attention, the

ungainly object hobbled toward them.

“Mira tried to shape something for us to ride to Carthage,” Twitch explained.

Jace exploded into laughter. “That? It looks like a walking mud ball.”

Cole tried not to laugh. The description was pretty accurate.

“I was rushed,” Mira said, flustered. “Making semblances is very hard. Even the best shapers take their time when simulating life.”

“So why try?” Jace asked.

Mira shrugged. “I saw what my power can do when we fought Carnag. Remember how big it was? How well it simulated me and my father? That power is inside of me now. I just have to learn to use it. I know I’m capable of big feats of shaping. I thought maybe if I harnessed my desperation, I could shape something useful.”

The mud ball toddled over to Jace, then bumped into his leg and tipped over. The undersized semblance started to sway gently and made a garbled, squishy sound.

“Is it trying to speak?” Jace asked. “You know, it looks a little like Twitch. Was he your model?”

“Stop it,” Mira said, swatting Jace on the shoulder. She staggered, and he caught hold of her.

“What’s the matter?” Jace asked.

“The effort took a lot out of me,” Mira said. “I’ll be all right.”

“You realize we have a long way to go,” Cole reminded her.

“I was trying to make it easier for all of us,” Mira said. They watched the misshapen little semblance as it tried to rock back into a standing position. Mira gave a little laugh. “It was supposed to be bigger.”

Her comment freed the others to laugh, and they did.

“Are you telling it to move?” Cole wondered.

“I designed it to follow us when we weren’t riding it,” Mira explained. “I think it understands that part. It was supposed to have four legs. And it was supposed to obey instructions from me, but it seems mostly oblivious.”

“Can you shape it more?” Cole asked. “Improve it?”

Mira shook her head. “I’m wiped out.”



“Can you unshape it?” Jace inquired. “People might find it.”

“Probably, but it would drain me too much. I’m already going to have a hard time keeping up with you guys. I was stupid to try to make a semblance all at once. Carnag did it, so I thought maybe I could too. Projects like this are normally done step-by-step, a little at a time.”

The semblance stood up and waddled toward Cole. He backed away. It was kind of creepy.

“What’s it made of?” Jace asked.

“Looks like dirt, but feels more like cork,” Mira said. “It’s tougher than it feels, but again, not quite what I was after.”

Jace pushed the semblance over. Crouching, he ran his palms over it, rocking it gently. “You guys go on ahead. I’ll catch up after I ditch this thing.”

“What are you going to do?” Cole asked.

“Stash it in the woods far from the road,” Jace said. “It isn’t light, but with my rope I can handle it.”

“Isn’t that kind of mean?” Cole asked.

Jace gave a frustrated sigh. “It’s a walking hunk of cork, Cole! Mira made it out of rubble. It doesn’t have feelings. But it might try to walk toward us, which would be a big favor to anybody who wants to track us down.”

“Okay,” Cole said. “Makes sense.”

“Get going,” Jace said. “People might be after us. We don’t want to waste our head start.”

“Are you okay to travel?” Cole asked Mira.

She wiped a hand across her forehead. “I have to be. No other choice.” She glanced at the sky. “I just wish the star was still there.”

“It’ll be all right,” Cole said, unsure about whether he believed his words but trying to help her feel better.

“You go first, Mira,” Twitch suggested. “We’ll keep an eye on you from behind.”

Mira drew her Jumping Sword, aimed it down the road, and called, “Away.” The Shaper’s Flail followed. Cole heard her repeat the command

when she landed, leaping forward again. Wings fluttering, Twitch sprang after her. Cole held out his sword and jumped.

## CHAPTER

### 3

# CARTHAGE

**B**reezing through the night, leap after leap, Cole waited for Mira to tire out and stop, but instead she kept going. He hung back, keeping her in view. Cool air rushed by with every jump.

One of the moons glowed fairly bright tonight. Another, a slender crescent, was just rising. The night sky in the Outskirts changed without pattern. The inconstancy allowed Mira and her sisters to be marked by stars without anyone catching on. Ten or eleven different moons could show up on any given night, although Cole had never seen more than three at once. Many of the moons were similar to Earth's, though tonight's struck him as a bit more yellow.

Cole scanned the shadows beneath the trees at either side of the road. Anything could be lurking under the cover of that darkness. He glanced behind as well, braced to see a platoon of legionnaires or mysterious riders on ragbeasts.

One luxury of the autocoach was that it shut out the rest of the world, producing the comforting illusion that they were hidden and safe. Cole supposed that was wonderful until you ended up at the bottom of a ravine after an ambush. Without the coach, Cole felt more exposed, but that kept him more alert.

Mira's concerns about her sister caused Cole's thoughts to turn to his lost friends. He remembered when he last saw Jenna, caged in a wagon, still in her Cleopatra costume from Halloween. His last glimpse of his best friend, Dalton, had been of a sad, dusty clown, also in a cage. They had been on their way to be sold as slaves when Cole was selected to join the Sky Raiders.

The thought of Jenna behind bars enraged Cole. But she probably wasn't in a cage anymore. She was a slave somewhere. Was she working in a kitchen? Was she bringing meals to some lazy friend of the High King? Those thoughts didn't make him any less angry.

Jenna was smart and funny. She was pretty and nice. She didn't deserve this fate. Going into the wrong basement on Halloween had ripped her life away—and visiting the spook alley had been Cole's idea. Dalton was a great guy, too—the bestest friend Cole had ever had, and his life was destroyed as well.

Where were they tonight? Where were the dozens of other kids who were smuggled from Mesa to the Outskirts? Were they comfortable? Were they suffering? They could be in any of the five kingdoms. And they were in danger. The shapemaker Quima had warned that the High Shaper intended to perform experiments on them involving their shaping powers. Kids from outside the five kingdoms tended to have shaping powers. The slaver Ansel had sold all the kids with the most potential to the High King.

Bounding along the moonlit road, Cole had to believe his friends were all right. He had to believe they were occupied with safer tasks than raiding sky castles. Cole had considered setting off on his own, with the sole purpose of finding his friends. But the trail was cold. He had no idea where to start. Jenna, Dalton, and the others could be anywhere.

Searching for them alone would put him at a serious disadvantage. Cole knew little about the Outskirts, and he would have no help. If he stuck with Mira, not only could he lean on her knowledge of the five kingdoms, he could also count on finding rebels like Joe who were willing to assist a princess in exile. Cole tried to renew his faith that, as he helped Mira and kept his eyes and ears open, eventually he would find his friends.

How many others did he need to find? Right now his main concern was saving Dalton and Jenna. But what about Jenna's friends Chelsea and Sarah?

Or Blake? What about the rest of the victims? Cole knew most of them by face if not by name.

If he found Dalton and Jenna and learned of a way home, would he ditch the others? It was hard to say. If he was ever fortunate enough to be in that position, he'd decide then.

What about Mira? If he found a way home, would he abandon her? She had already become a real friend. Without her, he would probably still be stuck with the Sky Raiders, which meant his job as a scout would probably have gotten him killed by now.

Mira was always trying to excuse him from making her problems his own. But that only made Cole want to help her more. Without his aid, she probably wouldn't have made it this far. He had saved her bacon more than once.

Others would aid her if he left. Jace could be a jerk, but he was totally devoted to her. Twitch would help too. And as a member of the resistance, Joe seemed fully committed as well.

Cole watched Mira jumping along ahead of him. Deciding whether he would leave her was pointless at the moment. By the time something like that became an issue, the circumstances might be totally different. Hopefully, by then, Dalton and Jenna could help him choose.

Finally, Mira came to a halt and looked back at Cole. He aimed his next jump to the side of her and landed in an awkward stumble. Twitch fluttered to a stop nearby.

"Tired?" Cole asked.

"I could keep going," Mira said. "I'm worried that Jace hasn't caught up yet."

Cole looked back down the road. Jace could be a pain, but it would be tragic if anything happened to him. Jerk or not, he was a friend. And he was good in a fight, a survivor. "He's probably fine. I bet we're just going faster than him."

"Right," Mira agreed. "The trees have thinned out."

Cole nodded. With brushy fields on either side of the lane, Jace wouldn't be able to slingshot himself off trees. It would make him even slower.

“If we’ve been stretching our lead this whole time,” Twitch said, “we may have a big wait ahead of us.”

“All the more reason to pause now instead of later,” Mira said. “We don’t want to lose him. If he’s in trouble, we have to go back.”

“If he’s in trouble, it’s probably more than we can handle,” Cole said. “He’s not easy prey with that rope. If he doesn’t show up, I’ll go back. You and Twitch need to keep going.”

Twitch moved off the road and into the brush. “How about we wait behind those bushes?” he suggested. “We’ll have a view of the road, but we can lay low if unexpected visitors show up.”

“Jump to the bushes,” Cole advised. “That way there won’t be any tracks leading to our hiding spot.”

“Good thinking,” Twitch said, springing into the air, wings a shimmering blur.

Cole and Mira jumped to the bushes as well. Mira sat down, legs bent in front of her. She crossed her arms and put them on her knees, resting her head on her arms.

“I’ll keep watch,” Twitch volunteered. “The grinaldi have sharp night vision.”

“What can’t you guys do?” Cole asked.

Twitch shrugged. “My people aren’t good swimmers. We avoid deep water.”

“You exhausted?” Cole asked Mira.

“My head aches,” she replied. “Could be worse. At least no evil shapers have caught up to us.”

“You two did well back there,” Twitch said. “Those Jumping Swords are effective weapons.”

“They’re useful,” Cole said. “It stresses me out to attack with them, though. It’s kind of like having a bow with only one arrow. And you’re the arrow.”

Twitch and Mira both laughed at the description.

“Thanks, by the way,” Mira said. “You probably saved my life again. I was exposed to that monster cat.”

“Only because you helped Jace,” Cole said, trying not to show how pleased her gratitude made him. “He protected us too. No need to keep score.”

“Sorry I didn’t get more involved,” Twitch said. “I hovered through the fight. I was watching for my moment. I’m more a rescuer than an attacker.”

“I’m glad,” Cole said. “You’ve rescued me before. Jace too.”

Twitch gave a small smile. “Like you said, no need to keep score.”

Something white and gray swooped down and landed beside Mira with a flurry of feathers. Cole recoiled and raised his sword, then recognized the cockatiel Liam had given them to serve as a scout.

“Mango!” Mira exclaimed. Extending her arm, she let the semblance perch on her wrist.

“Where is the autocoach?” the cockatiel inquired.

“Didn’t you see?” Mira asked. “It crashed down into a ravine.”

“I don’t belong to the coach,” the cockatiel said. “I return to you. How far back did it crash?”

“A good ways,” Mira said. “We were ambushed.”

The cockatiel whistled. “Sorry I missed warning you.”

“It was a small force,” Mira said. “Have you seen Jace?”

“No,” Mango replied. “I spent most of my time up ahead. The road from here to Carthage looks clear. We’re not using the main route. This road is less direct and less traveled.”

“Is the city much farther?” Cole asked.

“If you hurry, you could get close by morning,” Mango said.

“Go find Jace,” Mira said. “He’s catching up to us on the road. Then report back. Watch for anybody who might be following us. They could be in dark armor with strange mounts.”

“Will do,” Mango replied, taking flight.

They watched the bird disappear into the night in the direction they had come. Cole felt relieved to have avoided the responsibility of going back for Jace.

“I’ve never been to Carthage,” Twitch said.

“Me neither,” Mira said. “I’ve only heard stories. It’s an old city. A big one. It straddles two kingdoms—the west side is in Sambria, the east in Elloweer.”

“Joe wants to meet us on the Elloweer side,” Cole reminded them.

“Which worries me,” Mira said. “On that side our renderings won’t work anymore. No Jumping Swords. No golden rope.”

“Will they stop working right on the border?” Cole asked. “Won’t they work a little while we’re still close to Sambria?”

“They would work a little in Junction, between the kingdoms,” Mira said. “Once you cross into another kingdom, everything is different. The boundaries have existed since anyone can remember. In populated areas the border is usually marked. But marked or not, the effect is the same—the way shaping works changes. I guess there’s a small chance some of our renderings might work a little in the other kingdom, but they’ll work just as well a hundred miles into Elloweer as they will right after stepping out of Sambria.”

“My ring, for example,” Twitch said. “It reverts me to my Ellowine form even when I’m in another kingdom.”

“But items like Twitch’s ring are rare,” Mira said.

“Here comes Jace,” Twitch said. “He made pretty good time. We never stopped until just now.”

Cole saw Jace propelling himself down the road, his golden rope coiling and uncoiling like a spring, first thrusting him forward, then cushioning his landing. The result had him moving almost as fast as they could with their Jumping Swords.

Twitch gave a whistle, and Jace came to a halt the next time his rope absorbed his landing. “Where are you?” Jace called in a hushed voice.

Twitch sprang over the bush toward the road. Cole helped Mira to her feet. They tromped to the road instead of jumping.

“How’d it go?” Cole asked.

“Mira’s sidekick is well off the road,” Jace said. “Didn’t take too long. No sign of pursuit yet. Should we keep going?”

“Yes,” Mira said.

“Are you sure you don’t need a longer break?” Cole asked.



“I could use one,” Mira admitted. “But we can’t afford it. If word is out about our location, we can’t let our enemies catch up to us. We need to get to Carthage and find a place to hide out.”

Mango fluttered down. “Found Jace. Didn’t take long.”

“Scout ahead and behind,” Mira said. “Let us know if danger approaches. After we get to Carthage, we’ll cross into Elloweer. As a semblance, you can’t go there, so find Joe and tell him where we went. Once Joe catches up to us, go back to Liam and let him know what we’re doing. Then serve him until I return to Sambria.”

The cockatiel dipped her head. “As you desire.” She took flight, climbing swiftly.

Cole shook his head, realizing he barely even reacted now to a magically created talking bird helping out the group. It was amazing how quickly the totally bizarre could become normal when it was part of your everyday life.

“I’ve never been to Carthage,” Jace said. “I hear it’s quite a city.”

“Not many cities span two kingdoms,” Mira said. “Add that it’s on a river, and you have a major trade center.”

“And we have a few ringers to spare,” Jace said with a grin. “I brought our money from the coach.”

“We’re not on holiday,” Mira scolded.

“Plenty of people in cities have money,” Jace said. “We’ll draw less attention if we don’t look like we’re hiding.”

“Kids spending a lot of money always draws attention,” Mira said, “as curiosities and as targets.”

“She has a point,” Cole said. That was as true back home in Arizona as it was here.

“So do I,” Jace replied harshly. “I’ve spent my life as a slave. I don’t want to keep living like one longer than necessary. I’m free, and I have money. I don’t think we should start tossing around gold ringers, but plenty of free kids our age have some money on them. Enough to buy some food and have a little fun.”

“No fun,” Mira said sternly. “We need to stay as miserable as possible.”

Jace chuckled. “You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Mira said. “We’ll have to spend a little money on food and lodging. But we need to be smart about it. Kids our age don’t normally book rooms for themselves.”

“Some kids have wealthy families,” Jace said. “Some have jobs. Leave it to me. I’ve worked in cities. I can imitate a free kid better than any of us.”

“You don’t have to imitate one,” Cole said. “You are one. Your mark says so.”

Jace rubbed the freemark on the back of his hand. “Declan gave us the right marks, but free kids and slave kids act differently.”

“Me, Twitch, and Mira used to be free,” Cole reminded him.

“Sort of,” Jace allowed with a snort. “Mira was royalty on the run, you were free in another world, and Twitch was free among the grasshopper people. I actually know what normal life is like here. How people act.”

“You’re very streetwise,” Mira said, rolling her eyes. “Just try not to spend too big. And don’t lose your temper.”

Jace grinned. “Lose it? Don’t worry. I always keep it handy. Last one to Carthage has bug parts.”

“Hey!” Twitch protested.

“Oh, yeah,” Jace fake apologized. “Rat parts?”

“How about last one there was born a slave?” Cole said.

Jace flashed him an angry look. “Last one there hangs back in fights and sometimes helps a little at the end.”

“Cut it out,” Mira said. “How about we actually start? First one there is the fastest.” She raised her sword and called, “Away.”

The boys followed.

As he sprang along the road, one huge leap after another, Cole tried not to stew about Jace’s accusation. Cole supposed he had hung back a little in their last fight. But Jace’s golden rope was easily their best weapon. Cole had charged into danger many times. He was no coward—he just wanted to make his attacks count.

Jace was just blowing off steam because of the crack about his slavery. It had been harsh to tease him about something he couldn’t control, but Jace

had been doing the thing to Twitch. If he could dish it out, he needed to learn to take it, too.

By jumping each time he landed, Cole didn't find the travel too tiring. The Jumping Sword did most of the work. He just needed to correctly time each command and aim the blade in the right direction.

Even without heavy exertion, Cole wished he had caught some sleep in the coach. By the time the approaching dawn began to color the horizon, his eyelids were feeling heavy. Cole wondered if it was possible to fall asleep while sailing through the air at terrific speeds. If he got tired enough, and the jumps were repetitive enough, he suspected the answer was yes.

As the sky grew lighter, Mira paused and sheathed her sword. Cole came to a stop near her. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

"I noticed cottages up ahead during my last jump," Mira explained. "It's getting too bright."

Twitch removed his ring, and his translucent wings disappeared. He looked like a normal human boy.

"We have to be close," Jace said. "We went fast all night."

"I probably need to lose the flail," Mira said. "I can't use it in Elloweer, and it'll attract too much attention on the road."

"Aw, crud," Cole said. "That thing has saved us more than once."

Mira pointed off to the side of the road. "Flail, hide." The flail plunged into a bush beyond some trees in the direction she had indicated. "I'd send it back to Asia and Declan, but it can't interpret commands like that. Maybe we'll come back this way someday."

They started walking. Cole's eyes felt dry and itchy. He kept blinking and rubbing them, but the irritation persisted. He needed to sleep.

Under the light of dawn, they began to pass farms. A wagon went by in the opposite direction. The driver hardly looked at them.

"Don't tense up when you see people," Jace told Cole. "You were glancing at that guy too much. Nobody knows us. We're free kids on a stroll. Act like you own the road. Don't pay attention to other people, and they probably won't pay attention to you. If they want to be friendly, let them make the first move."

Cole resisted the urge to get defensive. He *had* felt tense when he saw the driver, and it might have shown. “Good advice.”

After the road briefly became the main street of a little hamlet, they began to pass many more homesteads, large and small. People went up and down the road on horseback, in wagons or carriages, and on foot. The presence of so many other people helped Cole relax and feel less conspicuous. The crowds dispelled his sleepiness. He watched for legionnaire uniforms and tried to casually notice whether any of the passersby showed unusual interest in Mira.

As the sun climbed, the lane continued to get busier until it joined up with a larger road. Coming around a bend, Cole looked out at a massive wall that was the dark green of a forest at twilight. Beyond the imposing barrier, rooftops, domes, towers, and spires suggested a city of greater scale than Cole had expected. It didn’t look anything like the scattered tall buildings and sprawling suburbs of Phoenix. This city was more compact, with architecture that brought to mind ancient capitals from history books.

“That really is a city,” Cole muttered.

“You didn’t think the five kingdoms were all farms and woods, did you?” Jace asked.

“And magical floating castles,” Cole added.

“He hasn’t been here long,” Mira said. “We’ve avoided the more populated areas.”

“Which isn’t always the best strategy,” Jace said. “It can be easier to get lost in a crowd.”

“There are pros and cons,” Twitch said. “Crowds have lots of eyes.”

“Among the pros are food and beds,” Jace said. “I’ll take my chances.”

“What’s Elloweer like?” Cole asked. “I still don’t know much about it.”

“It’s hard to explain,” Mira said. “The shaping in Sambria seems straightforward to me. Elloweer is more mystical. The shapers there spice things up with showmanship. They call their art enchanting.”

“They make seemings,” Twitch said.

“Seemings are illusions,” Mira explained. “The best seemings look totally authentic, but they’re not tangible, no matter how solid they appear.”

“And then there are the changelings,” Jace said.

“Changelings are living things that have been altered,” Mira said. “In Sambria, we can imitate life with semblances, but our kind of shaping doesn’t work well on living things. Some of the Ellowine enchanters can make astonishing alterations to living beings.”

Cole glanced at Twitch.

“What? Are you wondering if I’m a changeling? If so, it happened a long time ago, to my great-great-great-grandparents. And eventually I inherited it. But our traditions hold that our ancestors came to Elloweer from elsewhere.”

“It’s believed that Elloweer connects to many worlds,” Mira said. “Or at least it may have in the past. Like Twitch, some of the unusual Ellowine people look human if they leave their kingdom. Others physically can’t leave at all.”

“Standard advice in the five kingdoms is to steer clear of Elloweer,” Jace said.

“I didn’t get taken as a slave until I left Elloweer,” Twitch complained.

“Well, in Sambria, people think twice before heading too far east,” Jace said. “Weird stuff happens there.”

“Nobody knows all aspects of Ellowine enchanting,” Mira said. “It’s almost as murky as the shaping in Necronum.”

Cole stared ahead at the city. “What’s the wall made of? It looks a little translucent. Is it jade?” His grandpa had a carved jade sphere from China of similar color and texture.

“Who knows?” Mira said. “It was shaped long ago. You can bet it’s tougher than jade. The old-timers who used shaping for construction knew their craft.”

“If it was made by shapers, the wall must be different on the east side of the city,” Cole reasoned.

“We’ll see soon enough,” Mira said.

The nearer they drew to the wall, the more details Cole could distinguish. The smoky green surface was ornately carved, especially near the top, with figures in relief and twisting vines bearing fruit. Because of the size and artistry, Cole suspected that on Earth, the wall would be one of the wonders of the world.

The road led to a massive gate, wide enough for a pair of wagons to pass each other going through. A raised portcullis hung above the opening like a row of giant spears. Pairs of armed guards stood at either side of the gate, vigilantly watching all who came and went. At least the guardsmen weren't dressed as legionnaires.

"We should split up on the way in," Twitch suggested. "In case they have descriptions of our group."

"Not a bad idea," Jace said. "I'll stick with Mira. You two go first. Just head straight, then wait for us down the road. Remember, you come here all the time. You're bored of this place. You belong here."

Cole and Twitch picked up their pace while the others hung back. A busy stream of people were entering and exiting. The guards were paying attention, but nobody was getting stopped or questioned. Cole pressed forward, watching the guy in front of him, keeping his eyes off the guards. He tried to look and feel bored, but his heart was racing.

The gateway's tunnel was about fifteen paces long. As Cole entered, he noticed one of the guards watching him. Beneath the shadow of the wall, the sweat on his back felt slimy. He became painfully aware of the sword belted to his side. How suspicious did it look? Did kids carry swords here? He grew hyperconscious of the ringers he had tied around each leg—a serious amount of money. What if he was caught hiding so much cash?

Forcing a yawn, Cole stretched as he walked. Trying to dwell on dull thoughts, he kept putting one foot in front of the other. He felt relief as he passed through to the other side of the wall, and saw the city spread out before him. The smallest buildings in view were three or four stories high, with some structures rising much higher. Merchants peddled their wares from stalls along the street. Others set their merchandise on blankets. Products included fruit, meat, clothing, jewelry, live birds, and painted statuettes. The herds of people forced the wagons to make their way slowly, though the throng tended to part when horses got near. A couple of autocarts fought the crowd as well, pulled by walking bricks.

Cole and Twitch moved down the street a few blocks, then paused at a corner. The cross street was busy but not as crowded as the avenue that came

through the wall. After a couple of minutes, a hand clapped down on Cole's shoulder from behind.

"We want you for questioning," a gruff voice said.

Cole went tense for a moment, then shrugged away from Jace. "You're hilarious."

"I told you we'd sail through if we just acted natural," Jace said.

"Where to now?" Twitch asked.

"I vote for food," Jace said. "We should spend most of our time on the Sambria side until Joe shows up. We can check his fountain every day, but I'd rather lay my head where I know my gear will work."

Down the cross street some distance, Cole noticed a man step out of a doorway. He wore a familiar wide-brimmed hat and a long, weathered duster. Not a young man, he looked as lean and tough as beef jerky. Cole would never forget that face. It was Ansel, the slave trader who had brought Cole's friends to the Outskirts.

## CHAPTER

# 4

## SLAVER

**F**or an instant, Cole could neither move nor breathe. Ansel was the man who had taken him captive, threatened him with a sickle, and chained him to the back of a slave wagon. He was cold, competent, and dangerous. And he was not yet looking Cole's way.

As Cole moved to step around the corner and out of sight, Ansel's narrow eyes flicked in his direction. Perhaps the motion had drawn his glance. There was no way to be certain whether Ansel recognized him, but for a slight moment their gazes connected. With a sickening jolt of panic, Cole knew he had better assume the worst. Ansel wasn't the type to miss much.

"We need to split up now," Cole said hurriedly. He didn't want to leave the only friends he had with danger coming his way, but he knew it would be tricky to disappear into the crowd moving as a group. If they stayed together, they might all get captured. His friends didn't deserve that risk. Besides, the others would have a better chance of helping him if they were free.

"What?" Mira asked.

Backing down the street, Cole gestured for the others to scatter. "The slaver who captured me is here. I think he saw me. He knows I shouldn't be free. Let's meet up on the Elloweer side by the fountain Joe talked about."



Twitch was already walking away into the crowd. Jace and Mira hesitated, but a shooing motion from Cole got them going. Cole soon lost sight of them. He was on his own. At least his friends had taken him seriously.

If Ansel was running, he might already be near the corner. If he was walking quickly, Cole still only had a moment or two.

Having already hustled some distance down the street, Cole stepped through the nearest door and into a large, busy eatery. It was mostly men inside. They sat on benches at long, wooden tables. Huge, skewered roasts rotated above fire pits. The air smelled of smoke, charred meat, and herbs. In spite of his current desperation, Cole's hunger reacted to the rich aromas.

Cole noticed windows on the far side of the room. Windows meant a yard or a street. He had no idea whether Ansel had seen him duck into the eatery. He hadn't risked looking back, for fear of showing his face. But he knew he had to keep moving just in case.

Running would attract attention, so Cole walked across the room as slowly as he dared, weaving around tables, trying to look casual. Nobody seemed to pay him any mind.

Maybe Ansel wasn't following him at all. The slaver might not have recognized him. Cole risked a backward glance. Nobody else had come into the establishment yet. If Ansel was in pursuit, he may not have seen him go in here. The crowded street outside should have provided decent cover.

Even if Ansel caught up to him, what could the slaver do? According to the mark on his hand, Cole was free. But Ansel knew he should have a slavemark. The unlikely change could lead to dangerous questions at a time when Cole and his friends needed anonymity. Slaves or not, they were fugitives. The legion wanted all of them, especially Mira. Now that she had her shaping power back, the High Shaper would stop at nothing to find his daughter. Last night's ambush was proof.

Cole's stomach churned. If Ansel caught him and investigated his freemark, his escape from Skyport would come to light, along with his connection to Mira. He'd not only be in trouble with Ansel, but with the High King too. He'd end up enslaved, imprisoned, or worse. And that would be the end of trying to find his lost friends and get home.

On the far side of the room, beyond an interior wall, Cole found a door. Relief surged through him. He glanced back across the room just in time to see Ansel enter.

The slaver's eyes found him immediately. In that steady gaze, Cole saw suspicions confirmed, along with the wordless gloating of one who has uncovered the guilty secret of another. As Ansel calmly started his way, Cole darted out the doorway.

The door led to a narrow alley paved with dark bricks. In one direction, the alley opened onto a busy street. In the other direction, the alley turned a corner. If he ran for the street, he could probably get lost in the crowd. But if Ansel doubled back and looped around, the slaver might be waiting for him by the time Cole got there.

Cole ran away from the street, toward the bend in the alley, hoping it would lead someplace better. As he reached the corner, Cole heard the door open behind him.

Around the corner the alley became narrower, with little puddles of grimy water where bricks were missing or had sunken. After no more than twenty paces the alleyway elbowed again. Beyond the next turn awaited a dead end. Sheer walls rose five stories high in all directions. There was a single recessed door on the left. Trying the handle, Cole found it locked.

Footsteps approached. Not running, but walking with purpose.

Trying to stay calm, Cole drew his Jumping Sword. At least there were no onlookers.

He considered waiting for Ansel to round the corner, then jumping straight at him. It would be an all-or-nothing attack. What if the slaver dodged it? Cole had no desire to tangle with him in a fair fight.

Even if he could kill Ansel, would it be right? Ansel was following him, which seemed menacing, but the slaver had made no threat, and taking slaves was legal in the Outskirts.

Cole aimed the sword at the top of the left-hand wall and said "away" in an urgent whisper. He soared upward like a rocket, reached the top of the building at the apex of his flight, and landed gently. The flat roof had hatches for access, and nobody was up there. Hurrying away from the edge, Cole lost

all view of the alley. He couldn't be sure whether or not Ansel had witnessed his jump, but Cole felt certain that if he peeked down to check, Ansel would see him. He crouched in silence, aware of his rapid pulse.

"I know you're up there, Scarecrow," said a parched voice from down below, not loudly, but loud enough. "Probably with a rendering you swiped from the Raiders. You're in trouble, kid. The life of a slave ain't no picnic, but the life of a runaway is much worse. At least be man enough to face me. What am I gonna do? Fly?"

Cole hesitated. Ansel had just confirmed that he specifically recognized him. Could anything be gained by talking with the slaver, now that escape was in reach? Ansel thought Cole was a runaway. If Cole explained himself, was there a chance the slaver would leave him alone?

Jenna came to mind. So did Dalton. Ansel might have information about where they had been sent. Was there any way he would cough up some details? Cole doubted he would get many opportunities to speak to somebody with direct knowledge of what had happened to his friends.

Cole peered down to find Ansel looking up. He had a satchel over one shoulder, but his hands were empty. The slaver gave a nod. "That's right. Nothing to prevent us from having some words. How'd you end up here, Scarecrow?"

"Adam Jones let me go," Cole said. "I'm free."

"You have your papers?"

Cole had no such papers and didn't want to show Ansel that his slavemark had been shaped into a freemark. That would only make the slaver more curious. "No papers. But you're welcome to check with Mr. Jones. I didn't run away."

"Hasn't been many weeks since I sold you to the Raiders, Scarecrow. They free their own from time to time, but that takes years, not weeks. And they would give you proof of your freedom."

Adam Jones had helped Cole, Jace, Twitch, and Mira escape Skyport when the legion came looking for Mira. By issuing a command in code, he had his men slow down the legionnaires while Cole and his friends got away. But if

pressed, Cole figured Adam would call him a runaway in order to keep up appearances. “Why do you care?”

Ansel turned his head and spat. “Have we been introduced? Slaves are my trade, Scarecrow. I’d turn in a runaway on principle, especially one I sold, and that’s ignoring the reward.”

Cole knew he could end this conversation. He just needed to take off across the rooftops. But he didn’t relish the idea of Ansel scouring the town for him. If his fellow slavers were also in town, it could end up causing serious trouble. And what about Dalton and Jenna?

Should he show Ansel the freemark? Would that evidence satisfy him? At this distance, Ansel might assume it was a trick. Even if the slaver could examine the legitimacy of the mark, the impossible change might only heighten his interest.

Cole bit his lip. No matter what else he tried, he needed to fish for information about the other slaves. This man might have all the answers he needed!

“What about my friends?” Cole asked. “Do you know where they ended up?”

“We sold the lot of them,” Ansel said. “Are you still trying to rescue them? I can sometimes admire stubbornness. But not stupidity.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“All the deals go through me,” he said.

“One of my friends is named Dalton. You remember him?”

“You showed special interest in Dalton and another called Jenna,” Ansel said. “They both went to Junction. That was temporary. They’re long gone. They’ve been sent out across the five kingdoms by now.”

Cole heard a creak behind him. Whirling, he saw a balding, beefy slaver coming up to the roof through a hatch. It was Ham, who had greeted him in the basement spook alley back in Arizona.

For a moment, Cole stood frozen with surprise. If not for the faint sound of the hatch opening, he would have been blindsided and captured. Glowering, Ham rushed toward Cole. Pointing his sword to the roof across

the alley, Cole gave the command and leaped across. The slaver dashed to the edge of the building, then eyed the gap, as if considering a jump.

“Send him away or I’m gone!” Cole called, ready to make a longer leap.

“Come back down, Ham,” Ansel growled.

Ham retreated and disappeared down the hatch.

“Now I see why you were so talkative,” Cole said.

“I do what I can,” Ansel said. “Might as well come down too, Scarecrow. That sword may let you fly, but once I’m on your trail, it’s only a matter of time.”

“Don’t bother,” Cole said. “I’m free.” He showed Ansel the back of his hand.

Ansel frowned up at him for a long moment. Reaching into his satchel, he withdrew a spyglass. He held it up to an eye, focused briefly, then lowered it. “That looks pretty good from here. How’d you manage it?”

“I told you, Adam Jones freed me. He had some guy he knew change the mark. That’s why I don’t have papers.” Though bending the truth, Cole was trying not to stray too far from what actually happened.

“What guy?” Ansel challenged. “I’ve heard of some needle masters adjusting bondmarks after slaves are set free. But nobody can erase one and replace it with a freemark.”

“This guy could,” Cole said.

“Why would Adam Jones do a thing like that for a new slave?”

“I saved some lives, including his.” This wasn’t exactly true either, but Cole was trying to stay in the same neighborhood as the truth. After all, he *had* saved Mira.

“You’re a liar,” Ansel said. “There’s a lot more to this story.”

“I’m free,” Cole said. “Leave me alone, or I’ll tell the authorities.”

Now Ansel grinned. Even from five stories away, the expression made Cole want to run and hide. Ansel removed his sickle from his satchel. “The authorities? Tell you what, Scarecrow. I’m a man of my word. You come down here, let me have a look at that freemark, and I promise not to harm you. We’ll straighten things out between you, Adam Jones, and the authorities. If they agree that you’re free, I’ll pay you handsomely for the

trouble. Run, and I'll find you, hack off that hand with the phony mark, burn it, and drag you back to the Sky Raiders in chains. Choice is yours."

"How about option three?" Cole asked. "You already wrecked my life and the lives of my friends. How about you find some new slaves to pick on?"

"Not gonna happen, Scarecrow."

"You might end up chasing me for years," Cole said.

"Not likely," Ansel replied. "If so, I can afford it. The trick is living within your means. You stash away a little here, a little there. Go ahead, run off, and I'll accept it as your admission of guilt."

"I don't like you and I don't trust you," Cole said. "I'm leaving. You'll never see me again. If you do, you better watch out."

Ansel gave a dry laugh. "You just threatened me! That makes you the only living person to have done so."

Several paces behind Cole, a door crashed open. Ham staggered through, breathing hard, face red, pate sweaty.

"Away," Cole said, and he sprang back across the alley. He glanced down at Ansel. "Really?"

"I never agreed he wouldn't come up the other building," Ansel said.

"Door at the top was locked," Ham apologized.

"Leave me alone," Cole said. "I'm not running because I'm guilty. I'm running because you're chasing me."

Without waiting for a response, Cole pointed his sword, gave the command, and jumped to a more distant rooftop a couple of stories higher than his current position. Two more hops, and he found himself near a major street. After some brief reconnaissance, Cole jumped down into an empty alleyway adjoining the street. Trying to shake the suspicion that he was being watched and followed, he exited the alley and joined the crowd.

## CHAPTER

# 5

## EAST CARTHAGE

**A**s he made his way eastward through the streets of Carthage, Cole struggled to regain his composure. Without the Jumping Sword, Ansel would have nabbed him. Cole was unnervingly aware that he had almost become a slave again. It had been nice to pretend the freemark had ended that problem. But if Ansel cut off the hand with the freemark, what protection would he have?

Cole tried to look casual and blend in, but he kept flexing the fingers of his marked hand. It wouldn't stop shaking. He felt exposed. Should he have kept to the rooftops, using his Jumping Sword to put more distance between himself and Ansel? Or would that have only drawn more attention? Should he find a place to hide? Or would that just give Ansel time to catch up? Cole quickened his pace.

Ham had shown up out of nowhere. How many more of Ansel's people were already in pursuit? Cole strained to recall the different slavers from the caravan, watching for them in all directions.

Twitch had been right about crowds. There were too many eyes. Sure, you gained some anonymity among the big groups of people. But if you were being hunted, you ran the risk of crossing paths with the wrong person.

You also risked not seeing the people chasing you. In his imagination, Cole could almost feel the cool touch of steel as a wickedly sharp sickle slid across

his throat from behind. He kept one hand near the Jumping Sword, ready to draw it and take off if needed, crowd or no crowd.

Would Ansel really sever his hand? What kind of a world was this? Cole's problems used to involve getting his homework done on time and coping with an annoying sister. Now he had enemies who wanted to chop him up and enslave him! The threat might have been a bluff to scare him into surrendering. But probably not. Cole had the shivery feeling that Ansel was capable of that much, and worse.

He wasn't sure whether to mesh with the crowds or avoid them. It all depended on how Ansel decided to search for him. The major streets seemed like the most obvious places to look, so Cole steered away from them. The smaller streets offered less cover, but he had a better chance of seeing trouble coming and jumping away without causing a scene.

As Cole progressed from block to block, the buildings around him began to look dilapidated. Sagging roofs, weathered surfaces, broken windows, and boarded-up doors all caught his eye. The people wore shabbier clothes. Several eyed him and his sword. One man with a growth of graying stubble on his face openly sized up Cole as he walked by. Cole tried not to pay too much attention to the man, but he couldn't help noticing when the stranger started following him.

Cole tried to heed Jace's advice. He needed to look like he belonged here. But he was young, he couldn't hide his sword, and though somewhat soiled, his clothes were nice. He knew he stood out.

At the next corner, Cole turned and moved along the cross street. He glanced back. The stubbly stranger still followed him, walking fast enough to shrink the distance between them. He saw Cole's glance and raised a hand, palm cupped. "Spare a ringer or two?" he asked.

Cole looked away. Taking out even a couple of ringers would reveal his stash. Cole imagined that if the people of this neighborhood knew how much cash he had on him, they would devour him like piranhas.

"Sorry," Cole said over his shoulder.

The man broke into a shuffling jog. "Wait up, friend. Where are you heading?"



“To the east side of town,” Cole replied, unsure whether he should break into a run.

“East Carthage?” the man verified. “You took a bad turn, lad. This isn’t a safe part of the city. You need a guide, or you’re going to run into trouble.”

Cole’s instincts warned that this man was the trouble. In a few more steps the man would catch up to him.

Drawing his sword, Cole stopped and faced the stranger, even though the man was head and shoulders taller than him. “Back off,” he said, forcing his voice to sound firm. “I’m having a bad day.”

The man raised both hands. “What’s this? Are you coming into my neighborhood and threatening me?”

“I’m not looking for friends or guides,” Cole said. “Just leave me alone.”

The man’s eyes switched to a spot above and beyond Cole. The man gave a faint nod. Cole looked back in time to see another man lunge at him. Jabbing his sword at a drooping balcony across the street, Cole spoke the command and jumped.

Hands reached for him, but they arrived too late. Cole took flight and barely cleared the scarred railing to land three floors above the ground. Both men gawked up at him from below, mouths gaping.

“You don’t see that every day,” the stubbly man said. “Who’d have guessed he was some kind of shaper?”

The other man gave a dismissive wave and trudged away, shaking his head. They didn’t seem to be partners. Acquaintances maybe. The other guy had sensed easy prey and had wanted in on the action.

Aiming his sword at the roof of the building across the street, Cole jumped there. From the higher vantage point, he had a better view of the area, though taller buildings blocked the sight of East Carthage. He ran along the roof and sprang to another building, then another.

It was freeing and exhilarating to watch the shabby streets breeze by beneath his feet, and for a moment, he actually let go of his anxiety and just enjoyed the sensation of soaring. Who could catch him when he had his Jumping Sword?

Cole worked his way toward a nicer neighborhood. On the sixth roof, he noticed a woman watering her plants. She stared at him with wide eyes.

“Just passing through,” Cole called in his friendliest voice.

Her surprised expression turned scolding. “You’re going to stab your eye out.”

Cole laughed and jumped again, sword outstretched toward the next desired rooftop. What a crazy world it was where a woman showed more worry about him poking his eye out with a sword than she did about him taking fifty-yard leaps from one building to another.

He avoided major roads, sailing over side streets and alleyways instead. Even so, some people down below looked up at him; others spotted him from balconies or windows; and a few saw him from the tops of buildings. And those were just the people Cole noticed! In Sambria, the sight of a kid leaping from one building to another might not seem impossible, but it still attracted attention. Cole liked that the sword let him travel quickly, putting distance between himself and Ansel, but he knew he needed to get back to the ground. Everyone who saw him flying across the rooftops became a possible resource to those who wanted to find him.

Cole reached the intersection of two main boulevards. To proceed by rooftop, he would have to jump one of the teeming avenues, exposing himself to hundreds of eyes, so instead he backtracked and hopped down into a quiet alley.

Although the sun was climbing higher, it remained low enough for Cole to tell east from west. As he continued eastward, the buildings rose taller. Some were apartments or inns. Others looked like private palaces sandwiched into the city, their grounds confined behind iron fences or stout masonry.

Some of the buildings were a little more mysterious. A huge domed structure with many minarets might have been a house of worship or a museum. A gray compound with thick towers, heavy arches, and crenellated walls could have served as a military headquarters or a prison. A light, airy complex with terraced gardens, elevated walkways, and huge-windowed buildings might have been a school or a library.

Much of the city looked how Cole pictured the Middle Ages. But some of the architecture felt a little more modern, and some didn't look much like anything he had seen back on Earth. One building was shaped like a pyramid, but with an open, pillared floor between each level, like stacked patios. He passed a windowless black monolith with no visible entrance. Another structure seemed to be made entirely of stained glass, and bulged with overlapping bulbous shapes, reminding Cole of when he used to blow through a straw into a glass of milk until the bubbles overflowed.

As he got farther east, more of the buildings looked like they must have been constructed by shapers. Not only were their forms unusual, but many were seamless, as if carved from a single mountainous stone. Some exteriors were smooth with simple lines and minimal embellishments. Others featured intricate facades. Autocoaches became more prevalent, and some of the shops mentioned renderings or semblances on the signs.

And then the city ended.

Cole reached a long greenway that paralleled a wide, slow river. The surface of the water was perhaps sixty feet below the level of the greenway, flanked by stone walls instead of banks.

If the architecture on this side of the river had been impressive, the other side looked absolutely unreal. The river wall on the far side was the color of storm clouds, with bright strands of lightning flashing across it on occasion. Fanciful buildings rose to surreal heights, shimmering with electric colors. Huge shapes balanced on slender supports, and ponderous projections overhung empty space with no regard for the laws of physics.

Mira had mentioned that the Ellowine enchanters worked with illusions. Though the buildings appeared completely solid, some of what he saw had to be deception.

Running north to south, the river effectively divided the city. Cole supposed that the far side must be East Carthage. From where he stood, Cole could see two bridges spanning the river. Down by the water, docks protruded here and there on both sides. Workers wrestled cargo onto long, flat barges. Some of those docks might have ferries for crossing the river, but the bridges struck Cole as the surer option.

Turning north, he followed the greenway toward the nearest bridge. It was a pleasant walk. The strip of lawn and trees along the river provided a place for toddlers to play, dogs to fetch, old folks to sit, and many to stroll. It would have been a great place to ride his bike. He wondered whether they had bikes in Carthage. He hadn't seen any.

As the bridge drew nearer, Cole frowned. Crossing it would be dangerous. If Ansel anticipated him going to East Carthage, the bridges would be the most obvious routes to watch. But East Carthage wasn't Cole's only option. He could have fled to the Sambrian countryside or hidden someplace in West Carthage.

Cole wished he had more information. How many slavers did Ansel currently have at his command? Ham was in town. How many others? All of them? And how long would it take Ansel to mobilize them?

Since his encounter with Ansel, Cole had come east by the most direct route he could find, using the Jumping Sword part of the way. Even if Ansel had enough men to cover all options, Cole might be ahead of any pursuers. The more time went by, the more likely it was that Ansel could position slavers at key locations like the bridges. Cole sped up.

The impressive bridge was carved from the same dark green stone as the city wall. Decorated with friezes and traceries, it looked the same all the way across. Did that mean the border to Elloweer was on the far side? The elaborate bridge had minimal supports, so it had probably been made by shaping. Though wide enough for wagons, the span was packed with people on foot, about half heading east, half west. A pair of soldiers rode across on horseback.

Alert for familiar faces, Cole started across the bridge. Vendors lined the edges, their wares spread out on blankets. They called out to the pedestrians, luring their attention toward melons, marionettes, sausages, and tiny wooden deer that walked around on their own.

On the Elloweer side, Cole's best weapon would be rendered useless. He hated the possibility of getting chased with no Jumping Sword to help him, but he had to get to the fountain, and the longer he waited, the riskier the crossing to Elloweer would become. Cole did his best to merge with the

thickest clusters of people. He found a big man to follow and got close behind him.

At the midpoint of the bridge, Cole noticed a sign that read ELLOWEER in bright letters. Looking back, a sign facing the opposite direction announced SAMBRIA.

When Cole passed the ELLOWEER sign, for an instant he felt almost weightless, and tingles fizzed through him. His ears popped. Otherwise he felt no differently. The bridge looked the same. And the signs seemed to only mark the border. Maybe the bridge had been built the old-fashioned way. Or maybe the Elloweer side used an illusion to make it match the Sambria side. If so, it was very well done.

Peddlers and their blankets continued to border the bridge, but the merchandise was now incredible. One man had bowls of beautifully cut gems, ranging from the size of marbles to the size of eggs. Sparkling in the sunlight, they looked very authentic. Another man displayed an assortment of parrots with the brightest plumage Cole could have imagined. A third merchant hawked objects made of pure gold. But since nobody else gave the exotic goods a second look, Cole figured they must be illusions.

Near the far side of the bridge Cole saw an act that made him slow down. A young man sat on a woven mat with his legs crossed. Holding one arm straight out, he clutched a long bamboo pole vertically without letting it touch the ground. An older man started to climb the pole while the young man continued to serenely hold it upright. The older man flipped himself upside down and balanced atop the pole on one hand. In front of the mat was a bowl with ringers in it. A couple of insistent kids bothered their parents until they each got a copper bit to donate.

Illusion or not, Cole had never seen a street performance to rival it, and he would have paused to add a ringer of his own if he'd had one handy. Instead, he picked up his pace again, head down to partly conceal his face, eyes furtively studying the crowd.

Cole tried not to show his relief as he walked off the far side of the bridge. Nobody had stopped him, and he had seen none of the slavers from the caravan.

The road from the bridge emptied into a large square. In the center of the square, fenced off by a low, crystal wall, eight marble statues of young women frolicked together with loose choreography, their movements graceful and carefree. As Cole watched the prancing statues, he realized that their motions repeated about every minute and figured they were on an automatic loop.

The lofty buildings around the square competed for attention. One appeared to be constructed entirely of gold and silver. Another featured moving murals—monstrous figures engaged in fierce combat. A third rippled with ever-changing swirls of color, a prismatic display that made Cole think of molten rainbows.

Amazed by the sights, but anxious to get away from the busy area, Cole went down one of the lesser streets that branched out from the square. He needed to find the fountain with seven spouts, but had no idea where to start looking. The east side of Carthage seemed just as sprawling as the west.

Strange figures moved among the crowd, drawing less attention than Cole would have expected: a tall, graceful woman with the slit pupils and furry ears of a cat; a heavysset man with blue spikes protruding all over his body; a woman with feathery wings like an angel; a man whose head was way too large for his body. Cole tried not to stare. Their appearances could be illusions. Or maybe, like Twitch, they were truly different from regular humans.

“Hey, kid, try your luck,” said a man seated behind a crate with a blanket on it. Short and trim with a neat little mustache, he spoke in a raspy tenor. Three upside-down cups rested on the blanket.

“Sorry, not today,” Cole replied.

“Come on,” the man said. “You’re loaded. It’s easy.”

“I’m not loaded,” Cole said.

The man gave him a skeptical look and motioned him closer. Cole leaned in and the guy lowered his voice a little. “You’ve got ringers tied around your legs, kiddo.”

Feeling startled and foolish, Cole checked for obvious bulges in his pants legs. They looked all right.

“You didn’t do a bad job,” the man said. “Most people wouldn’t notice. I’ve got an eye for details. What do you say? Give it a shot. Easy as picking up money off the street.”

“None of my money is handy,” Cole said.

“All that on your legs and nothing in your pocket?” the man asked incredulously.

“Sorry,” Cole said, turning his pants pockets inside out.

“Hm,” the man said. “That makes you interesting. I bet you’ve got a story. On the run or something? You look a little young to be a criminal.”

“But not too young to take my money?”

“A guy’s gotta eat! What’s your story?”

Cole shrugged. “I’m just meeting up with some friends.”

The man grinned, tapping his temple. “I get it. The friends wanted you to take some ringers from one place to another. No questions asked. You deliver the ringers, make a little for yourself. Am I right?”

“Something like that,” Cole said.

“So you can’t risk the ringers you’re carrying,” the man said. “In a way, you were telling me the truth. You’re broke until you make your delivery.”

“Pretty much,” Cole said.

“I don’t suppose you’ll come back this way after you get paid,” the man mused.

“I can’t afford to risk my money,” Cole said.

“How about a freebie?” the man suggested. “It’s been slow today.”

Cole glanced down the street in the direction he had been headed. He didn’t want to get roped into some sort of con.

“No strings attached,” the man assured him. “Pick a cup.”

“Okay.” Lifting the middle one, Cole uncovered a translucent blue marble. “Now what?”

“Replace it.”

Cole covered the marble.

The man smiled. “I haven’t touched anything yet. Only you did. Agreed?”

Cole gave a nod.

“You watching?” the man asked. Sliding the cups with no great haste, he switched the middle cup with the left one. “All right. Guess where the ball is.”

Cole pointed at the left cup, which had been in the middle.

“Want to bet that money you’re carrying?” the man asked. “If you’re right, I’ll double it. You can deliver their share and keep yours.”

“No thanks,” Cole said.

“You sure? I’m good for it. Final offer.”

“It’s not mine to bet,” Cole said.

“Fair enough,” the man said. He lifted the cup on the right. There was nothing beneath it. The cup in the middle had nothing as well. “Try the one you chose.”

Picking it up, Cole revealed a small bird with brown feathers and a yellow breast. The little bird hopped twice and then flew away, tiny wings flapping.

“I had a feeling I would have lost,” Cole said.

Grinning, the man quickly turned over the cup on the right and handed it to Cole. The cup was full of blue marbles. “Trust those feelings, kid. When something looks too good to be true, it is. All the locals know better than to get involved in a shell game. I set up near Gateway Square to welcome the visitors, teach them a practical lesson or two. I haven’t seen you around. New to town?”

“Pretty new,” Cole replied.

“Tell me about these guys you’re working for,” the man said. “Could they use a fellow like me?”

“I don’t really know a lot about them,” Cole said. “They’re kind of mysterious.”

The man sighed. “Life in East Carthage.”

“Hey, maybe you can help me,” Cole tried. “I’m looking for a fountain with seven spouts.”

“What’s it worth to you?”

“It would save me some time. It’s part of the delivery process. I haven’t gone around counting the fountain spouts.”

“You think I do?”



“Maybe. You’re good with details. I could mention your help to the guys I work for.”

The man gave him a pensive stare. “You seem like a good kid. You’re trying to make some extra ringers. I can appreciate that. You want Lorona Fountain. It’s a long walk, but not complicated.” He gave Cole an explanation that involved four turns. “Got it?”

Cole repeated the directions back to him.

“Good,” the man said. “If you come to know and trust these people, tell them I helped you. Until then, be careful. Taking ringers from one location to another may seem like easy money. But when something looks too good to be true . . .”

“I hear you,” Cole said, feeling a little guilty about misleading him. For a shyster, the guy seemed like a decent person. “Thanks for the advice. And the directions.”

“Around your chest might be better,” the man said. “For the ringers. You can hide any bulges under enough layers to mask them.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Cole said, starting down the street. He mentally repeated the instructions as he went and kept his eyes open for the first intersection where he needed to turn.

The farther away Cole went from the river, the less fanciful the buildings appeared. Although he continued to spot bizarre people, the city itself began to look more normal.

He came to Lorona Fountain without missing a turn. The fountain served as the centerpiece of a modest plaza bordered by narrow streets and the plastered walls of residential buildings. Four cherubic statues played in the basin. Three of the pudgy cherubs clutched a shell in each hand, while the central one held a single shell over his head. Unlike some of the other statues Cole had seen in East Carthage, these were stationary. Each shell sprayed water.

The man had been correct. This fountain had seven spouts. Hopefully, that made it unique in East Carthage.

Cole didn’t see any of his friends. He felt a jolt of worry. What if something had happened to them? Shouldn’t they have had time to get here

first? He supposed he had hurried quite a bit with the Jumping Sword. What would he do if they didn't show up? He became acutely aware of how little he wanted to explore the five kingdoms on his own. In a foreign place like Elloweer, he would feel totally adrift.

Not wanting to look too conspicuous, he went and sat on a bench in the shade. Before long, his weariness began to catch up with him. The gentle splashing of the fountain didn't help.

What were the chances of Ansel or one of his men happening by? Cole surveyed the area carefully. He was on the other side of the city from where Ansel had spotted him. This plaza was relatively small and had little traffic. Joe must have chosen it for its anonymity. Ansel would be watching the main roads and bridges. And he would probably be more focused on West Carthage.

The longer he sat, the more Cole felt his exhaustion. Should he get up and pace? It would be foolish to doze. How bad would it be to close his eyes for a minute? Nobody else had shown interest in his shady bench, so Cole curled up his legs and leaned against the armrest. The position was dangerously comfortable.

Shaded from the high sun by a gnarled tree with sprawling branches, the temperature was nearly perfect. The fountain gurgled soothingly. As an experiment, Cole closed his eyes. He knew he should open them and take another peek. But it felt so nice to rest them, and he had just looked around a moment ago.

"Get out of here, you vagrant," a voice growled in Cole's ear, jarring him awake.

Cole leaped to his feet, blearily fumbling for an apology, until he recognized Jace grinning at him. Cole might have thrown a punch if he wasn't so glad to see him. "You need a new joke."

"I'll get one when this stops working," Jace said. "You're pretty casual for a wanted man. Pleasant dreams?"

"Just trying to fit in," Cole said. He looked around. "Where are the others?"

“Not far,” Jace said. “I booked us a few rooms nearby. We can’t wander the town with people after you. We’ll stay near here until Joe shows up.”

“Ansel saw me,” Cole reported. “The slaver—he came after me.”

“I know,” Jace said. “Twitch kept an eye on you. He told us you escaped with the Jumping Sword.”

“He knew that?” Cole asked.

“Twitch is pretty sneaky,” Jace said. “After watching your getaway, he caught up to me and Mira like it wasn’t much trouble.”

“Ansel promised to hunt me down,” Cole said.

“Sounds like a great reason for a public nap,” Jace said. “Come on.”

## CHAPTER

# 6

## KASORI

**H**alfway down a quiet side street, a few blocks from Lorona Fountain, the modest inn stood three stories tall. Light blue shutters covered the windows. Not flashy, not dumpy, it looked like dozens of other buildings Cole had passed throughout the day.

“No common room,” Jace muttered as they approached the front door. “That means no crowds.”

The main door from the street led to a smallish foyer where an inattentive woman sat behind a counter to receive guests. Jace waved at her as they walked by. She acknowledged him with a vague smile. Even in a strange and deadly world full of magical illusions, Cole supposed a boring job was still a boring job.

On their way up to the second floor, Jace produced a key. “I rented three rooms—the nicest one they had available, and two of their cheaper ones, including one that sleeps four. I wanted the workers to think we were servants getting rooms for our master. The lady up front didn’t press me for specifics. The best room is up on the third floor. We gave it to Mira.”

“Is it safe to leave her alone up there?” Cole asked.

“Our smallest room is just down from her,” Jace said. “I’ll stay there. You can go bunk with Twitch for now, finish up the nap you started by the

fountain. If you want, you can bathe in the room at the end of the hall.”

Cole didn't fail to notice that Jace kept trying to create situations where he might have Mira to himself. Jace still had it bad for her. He had probably booked rooms on different floors deliberately. Cole knew he shouldn't say anything, but some opportunities were too easy to resist. “Hoping for some more alone time with the princess?”

“Huh?” Jace asked guiltily.

“Like how you worked it to come into the city with her,” Cole said.

Jace gave an embarrassed smile and shook his head. “You really don't know when to shut up.”

“You didn't think it was obvious?”

Jaw clenched, Jace paused, air whistling through his nostrils. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. “It doesn't matter how I feel. She was out of my league even before I learned she was a princess.”

Cole shook his head. “You're probably the cockiest guy I've met. Why does it disappear when it comes to her?”

Jace shrugged. “Have you ever liked somebody you couldn't have?”

Cole could feel the blood rushing to his face. “Maybe.”

“How much did you like her?”

Cole shrugged, suddenly wishing the conversation was over. How had this become about Jenna? “A lot, I guess.”

“Did you ever let her know how you felt?”

“No way!” Cole exclaimed.

“Why not?”

Cole swallowed. “I didn't think it could work out.”

“You were scared,” Jace said.

“Mostly, I guess,” Cole said. “We became friends. That was good enough.”

“Was it really?” Jace pressed.

“No,” Cole admitted. “But I had time. I thought I would tell her someday.”

Jace chuckled. “Good luck with that now.”

Cole stared at him soberly.

“Is she back home?”

Cole kept staring.

“Oh,” Jace said, understanding dawning. “It’s that Jenna girl you talk about. Your friend.”

“Yeah,” Cole said, trying not to turn any redder.

“And now she’s lost,” Jace said with no trace of mockery. “She’s a slave.”

The last thing Cole wanted to do was cry in front of Jace, but his uncharacteristic kindness wasn’t making it easy. “Until I find her.”

“You will,” Jace said seriously. “Listen, you didn’t tell Jenna how you felt because you were nervous. But with Mira, there are real reasons I can’t say anything. She’s a shaper. I’m not. She’s way older than she looks. And she’s the High King’s daughter. Even in exile, that means she doesn’t slum with kids like me.”

“You’re scared too,” Cole said.

Jace huffed. “Maybe. And ashamed for wanting something so far out of reach. I’m a former slave with no family. And I’m far from grown up. But that doesn’t mean my feelings aren’t real. What I can do is watch out for her. And be her friend. Spend a little time with her. Is that too much to ask?”

“I get it,” Cole said. “I won’t tease you. I used to be terrified of people teasing me about Jenna.”

“Think about everything we need to do,” Jace said. “If Mira catches on to how much I like her, it could really mess things up.”

“I’m pretty sure she suspects,” Cole said.

“Suspecting is okay,” Jace said. “I just can’t make it clear. Do you think about Jenna a lot?”

“All the time,” Cole said. “Not in romantic ways,” he rushed to clarify. “I worry about her. I think about my friend Dalton, too. And the other kids.”

“I’ll help you find them,” Jace said.

“Thanks.”

Jace handed Cole a key and indicated a door. “I left some food in there that I brought from the autocoach. I’ll go out and buy more later. You shouldn’t go outside more than necessary.”

“Got it,” Cole said, wondering if he would have to spend the rest of his time in Elloweer indoors. “Thanks for finding us a place to crash.”

Jace nodded and took off down the hall. Cole watched him go, suspecting he may have spoken to the real Jace for the first time. Cole sometimes doubted whether Jace even had feelings. They were usually hidden behind serious defenses.

Cole used the key to enter his room. Four narrow beds took up much of the space. At least everything was tidy. Twitch sat on the edge of one of the beds, antennae and wings visible. Gazing at his friend, something occurred to Cole. “You’ll be like that all the time now.”

Twitch gave a nervous smile. “Yeah, outside the borders of Elloweer I looked like a regular human unless I used my ring. I’ve been gone long enough that it’s weird to think I can no longer camouflage myself that way. It sometimes made life easier. Outside of our few villages, the grinaldi aren’t commonly seen. When I went abroad in Elloweer, I always stood out.”

Cole crossed the room and sat on a bed. “Jace said you followed me after I ran into Ansel.”

Twitch stared at the floor. “I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“Thanks for having my back,” Cole said. “Watch out, though. You don’t want to get mixed up with those slavers.”

“I believe you,” Twitch said. “What did he say to you? I couldn’t get close enough to hear.”

“He promised to hunt me down and chop off my hand with the freemark,” Cole said.

Twitch winced. “He didn’t seem like the sort of guy you’d want as an enemy.”

“No,” Cole agreed.

“I bet you’re tired,” Twitch said.

“Kind of,” Cole said. “I dozed off a little, and it helped. How about you?”

“I’m exhausted,” Twitch said. “But being back in Elloweer is strange. I feel extra alert.”

“Nice to be home?” Cole asked.

“This isn’t home,” Twitch said, blinking rapidly. “Kasori is home. My village. The rest of Elloweer is mostly foreign to me. But being back here reminds me what I left behind.”

“You left to help your village,” Cole recalled.

Twitch bowed his head, antennae quivering. “And I failed miserably.”

“What were you trying to do?” Cole asked.

Twitch gave a heavy sigh and shook his head. “It’s my burden, not yours.”

“I’ll help if I can,” Cole said. “We all will.”

Twitch looked up at him, tears shimmering in his eyes, his expression miserable. “You know how you wouldn’t want me getting mixed up with those slavers?”

Cole nodded.

“I wouldn’t want you guys to get tangled up in my trouble. It would be unfair. It’s better to keep it to myself.”

“Come on,” Cole urged. “We’re friends now. You saved my life.”

Lowering his head, Twitch vigorously rubbed the back of one wrist. After a long pause, he gave a shuddering sigh. “Do you know about the champions of Elloweer?”

“Is that a sports team?”

Twitch attempted a smile. “Every town in Elloweer has a champion. In the big cities, the champion has twelve knights. The champion rules the town, defends the town, and decides how the taxes are spent. In the larger towns, an alderman usually manages the practical stuff, while the champion lives in comfort unless fighting a duel.”

“The champion is like a general?” Cole asked.

“A general has an army. The champion just has his knights. They serve as bodyguards and assistants. The cities of Elloweer have guardsmen to police the public, but they don’t fight wars with armies. By tradition, wars are decided by duels between champions.”

“Seriously? If somebody kills the champion, they take over the town?”

“Basically,” Twitch said. “It has to be a fair fight and follow the rules.”

“That’s crazy!” Cole exclaimed. “The leaders would just end up being the toughest fighters.” He pictured elections back home being resolved by mortal



combat. How bizarre would that be? Candidates would probably be much younger and skip the fancy suits. “How often does the best fighter also make the best leader?”

“That’s why most of them use aldermen to run things,” Twitch said.

“Who makes sure the fights follow the rules?”

“The knights,” Twitch replied. “If somebody killed the champion unfairly, like by poisoning him or stabbing him in the back, the champion’s successor would become the new champion instead of the killer.”

“The champion has a person ready to take his place?” Cole asked.

“Usually several people. Normally, the successors are among his knights.”

“That means one of his knights could murder the champion and replace him.”

“Which is why the champion tries to make sure his knights are honorable warriors who he can trust.”

“Why would anybody want to be a champion?” Cole asked. “Sounds dangerous.”

“It is dangerous,” Twitch agreed. “But you rule the town. If you want, you can keep most of the taxes for yourself and your friends. Some great champions have claimed multiple cities, ruling through aldermen, and they live like kings.”

“If somebody kills one of the top champions, do they get all of their towns?” Cole asked.

“Only a champion can challenge a champion,” Twitch said. “And you can only challenge for one town at a time. If the defending champion falls, the new champion brings the disputed town under his protection, and the champion’s successor inherits the other towns.”

“They always fight to the death?” Cole said.

“Yeah,” Twitch replied. “Technically, the champion can yield instead of die, but it never happens. If a champion yields, the opponent doesn’t have to show mercy.”

“Do these fights happen a lot?” Cole wondered.

“Not often,” Twitch said. “Every champion risks his life and his town when he challenges another. Most are happy to rule their current domains.

But some champions are greedy. Or ambitious. And sometimes disputes arise between cities that must be settled by the champions.”

“Instead of war,” Cole said.

“The duel is the war,” Twitch replied.

Cole considered the implications. “That seems less wasteful than a huge battle between two cities.”

“The losing city always suffers.” Twitch lowered his gaze. “Something I know a lot about.”

“Is that what happened to your village?” Cole asked.

Twitch scratched his cheek and rubbed his nose. “Kasori isn’t large. It isn’t rich. For generations, our champion never fought. He was more alderman than warrior. We’re simple people. There were hardly any taxes. Nobody got rich from them. We didn’t fight with our neighboring grinaldi villages, and who besides those villages would take the trouble to bother us? Then Renford came.”

“Who is that?”

“There’s a swamp not far from our village.” Twitch scrunched his nose. “A stagnant place full of reptiles and slime. Some ragged people live there, a few big families. The grinaldi plant, reap, and store. We work the land. The swamp folk are trappers and scavengers. They live like rats. After years without much contact between us, some of the swamp folk began to notice what we had, even though it wasn’t much. They sent their sons to train as soldiers, declared themselves a community, and named Renford Poleman their champion.”

“Oh, no,” Cole said.

“Renford showed up one day with five knights, all dressed in mismatched, secondhand armor. He challenged Brinkus, our alderman, to single combat. None of us really thought of Brinkus as a champion, though technically that was his job. He was an older man with a bad wing, forgetful and funny. His son asked him to step down and let him fight in his behalf, but Brinkus faced the challenge himself. And he died.”

“Making Renford your champion,” Cole said.

Twitch nodded. “Borus, the son of Brinkus, went to a neighboring village and asked to replace their champion. Their champion was no warrior, so he agreed to step down. You’re not supposed to challenge a new champion for six months, so Borus waited the correct amount of time, issued his challenge, and died as well. Renford went on to challenge and defeat the champions of the other two grinaldi villages in the area. He really is a skilled fighter. His knights, mostly brothers and cousins, are capable as well.”

“So an outsider took control of your villages,” Cole summarized.

“Not just any outsider,” Twitch said. “A lazy bully. Many of the swamp folk came to live on our land. My family was thrown out of our home. Soon his knights exceeded the limit of twelve. They didn’t take care of the land and property they confiscated. Tame fields grew wild. Livestock was wasted. Renford not only raised the taxes, but he increased them beyond what anyone could pay. No Ellowine champion is permitted to tax above fifty percent, but his fees came closer to eighty. The best of our workers could barely scrape by. When a group of our people protested, they were slaughtered.”

“What a mess,” Cole said, horrified.

“My people gave up,” Twitch said. “There weren’t a lot of us. Many of our bravest were killed. I had to do something, but attacking the swamp folk myself would have been pointless. I was a kid, and not much of a fighter. I snuck out of Kasori and traveled to Wenachi, the last of the grinaldi villages, too small and too far away to interest Renford. I told them our problem, and they agreed that if I could find a champion, he could represent their village. So I left in search of a hero.”

“And then you got captured as a slave,” Cole said.

Wings trembling, Twitch bowed his head. “The grinaldi live in isolation. We never bothered with freemarks or bondmarks. We had no needle masters. In my desperation to find a hero, I forgot how dangerous the rest of the world could be. I was caught, marked, and enslaved.”

“You still need a hero,” Cole said.

“Finding one won’t be easy,” Twitch replied. “I’ve tried. The few outsiders who even know about the grinaldi don’t care about us. Our villages seem rich to the swamp people, but not to the champions of prosperous

towns. I wasn't having much luck, so I went beyond Elloweer, hoping to bring back a great warrior from abroad."

"What about Joe?" Cole asked.

Twitch shook his head. "Mira needs Joe. Besides, he doesn't strike me as a professional swordsman. The duels are structured to allow no enchanting. Only traditional weapons and armor can be used. Renford may not be good for much, but the guy can fight."

"Then what's your plan?"

Twitch shifted uncomfortably. "I'm hoping Mira will let me have a share of the money Declan gave us. It might be enough to bribe a professional mercenary to serve as our champion. I need somebody with the skill to win, who also has enough of a life elsewhere that he won't want to stay on and replace Renford. A person could live well enough off the spoils of the grinaldi that it would be tempting to some."

"A good enough life that the swamp people wanted it," Cole said.

"But too lonely and modest for somebody accustomed to city living," Twitch replied. He folded his wings neatly. "Now you understand my quest."

"You have to succeed," Cole said. "The others will feel the same way. You should tell them. I'm sure they can help you find the right champion. Joe knows his way around. He can make sure you don't get ripped off."

Twitch paused. When he spoke, it was with thoughtful conviction. "You might be right. I've carried this secret for so long. I've always planned to keep my burden private until I found the right warrior. It feels surprisingly good to explain my mission to somebody."

"We all need help sometimes," Cole said. "You don't have to tackle this alone."

Twitch smiled. "Thanks, Cole. Your lost friends are lucky to have you. I feel more hopeful than I have in a long time."

"And I feel more sleepy," Cole said around a yawn. "Not because of your story," he added hastily.

"I'm with you," Twitch said. "I'm worn out. It would be a shame to waste these beds."

"First things first," Cole said. "It's been too long since I had a bath."

## CHAPTER

# 7

## CONFIDENCE LOUNGE

The next day, Cole stood by the window, peeking out through the blinds at the street below, feeling sluggish after too much sleep. A knock at the door startled him. Twitch went to answer. “Who is it?”

“A friend,” came the reply.

“Joe,” Twitch muttered, opening the door.

Joe entered the room looking cleaner than Cole had ever seen him. His gray leather jacket and jeans had been replaced by dark trousers, a maroon shirt, and a gentleman’s coat with a stylish cut. His face was shaved, his hair neat.

After peering out into the hall, Twitch closed the door.

“We were worried about you,” Cole said. “We didn’t know who you were going up against. Looks like you won the fight. Nice outfit.”

Smirking, Joe glanced down at himself. “This new persona is part of my plan. When possible, I dress for my roles.” He tossed a couple of packages onto the bed. “I got the two of you new getups as well.”

“Did you catch up to the Enforcer?” Twitch asked.

“It took some time. We were both on foot, but he moved well. In the end, I put an arrow through his back. I tried to question him but he was already gone. I swiped a horse and made my way here as quickly as I could. I

got in last night and spent the day running errands. At midday I met up with Jace by the fountain. He mentioned that you ran into some trouble, Cole.”

“Horrible luck,” Cole said. “In West Carthage, I bumped into the slaver who brought my friends here and had me marked. I used my Jumping Sword to get away, but he swore he’d track me down.”

“Name?” Joe asked.

“Ansel,” Cole said.

Joe frowned. “Carries a sickle?”

Cole nodded. “How’d you know?”

Joe gave an impressed whistle. “You don’t do it halfway when you pick your enemies. Ansel Pratt is one of the most ruthless slavers in the five kingdoms.”

“You know him?” Cole asked.

“Only by reputation. He’s a man to avoid unless you have a lot of money and you need his services. If clients default on an agreement, his retribution is swift and brutal. Other slavers have learned to stay out of his way. Only a few traders can compete with the volume of slaves he moves. He and his people are trouble.”

“He promised to chop off my hand with the freemark and haul me back to the Sky Raiders,” Cole said. “I believe he’ll try.”

“So do I,” Joe said. “That settles it. You have to come with Mira and me to the confidence lounge.”

“Where?” Cole asked.

“Most of the cities in Elloweer have one. East Carthage has three. They serve as meeting places where information can be exchanged with a degree of anonymity. Everyone who enters a confidence lounge has a seeming placed on them, so they don’t look like themselves. Clients range from criminals to government leaders. I secured a reservation at the most exclusive lounge in town.”

“To get information?” Cole asked.

“That’s part of it. Connections happen at confidence lounges. Deals get struck. Most seemings fade after a short while. I want to find somebody who

can put a lasting seeming on you and Mira to render you unrecognizable—today, if possible. Too many people are hunting you.”

For the first time since Ansel spotted him, Cole realized there might be an alternative to hiding indoors for the rest of his life. “They can do that?”

“The right enchanter can,” Joe assured him. “I belong to a resistance movement called the Unseen. The movement wasn’t strong in the parts of Sambria we traveled together, but there seems to be a decent presence here. I’m not supposed to tell any new people about our group without permission from two other senior members, but I don’t see any way around letting you kids in on our secret. Permission will have to come later. I can’t imagine I’ll take too much heat for it. After all, we’re on the run with Princess Miracle.”

“Have you met up with them yet?” Cole asked.

“We have secret ways of contacting one another,” Joe said. “I’ve seen some subtle signs of activity in the area. Last night and this morning I left marks around town for any of the Unseen to visit the Shady Lane Confidence Lounge this afternoon. If some members respond, there’s a chance we can get the aid we’re looking for.”

“When do we go?” Cole asked.

“I have a coach waiting,” Joe said. “I had initially planned to just bring Mira, since her face was the one I most worried about, but I expect they can accommodate an extra guest. Admittance is three gold ringers per person.”

“Three gold ringers!” Twitch exclaimed. “I could live for months off that much!”

“Good information doesn’t come cheap,” Joe said. “We should go.”

“Do I need ringers?” Cole asked.

“I’ll pay our entry fee,” Joe said. “You may want to carry some extra ringers, just in case, but leave your main stash here. Get changed and meet me downstairs. Don’t bring the sword.”

Cole had restrung most of his ringers to a cord around his chest. He took off his shirt, and Twitch untied the cord. Opening the packages on the bed, Cole found a blue button-down shirt and black trousers. He put them on, then pocketed a few gold, silver, and copper ringers.

“Wish me luck,” Cole said.

“Hopefully, the next time we see each other, I won’t recognize you,” Twitch replied.

Cole nodded, though the idea of looking like someone else was definitely weird. “See you later.”

Downstairs, Cole found Mira and Joe waiting for him. Joe carried a brown leather satchel. Mira wore a simple black dress with a red sash. Cole hadn’t seen her decked out so girly before.

“You look clean,” Mira said. “Our clothes have taken a beating since Cloudvale.”

Cole smiled, wanting to pay her a compliment, but unable to work up the courage. She looked a little too pretty. “This will be a new adventure.”

“We’ll talk in the coach,” Joe said, leading the way to the door. They exited onto a small side street. “This way.”

Joe led them around a corner and down a couple of blocks. They reached a street bustling with people, and Joe turned again.

“Keep your head up,” Mira murmured. “Don’t act like you’re hiding.”

Cole hadn’t deliberately bowed his head, but he realized she was right. He felt exposed. It would be just his luck to bump into a member of Ansel’s slave caravan.

Joe ushered them up marble steps to the pillared entrance of a grand hotel. The lobby floor was a checkerboard of gold and platinum. Bright rainbows crisscrossed the cavernous space overhead. A sapphire-blue waterfall dominated one corner, the vivid water tumbling in slow motion. Cole realized that much of what he saw must be illusion.

They crossed the lobby and exited through doors on the far side. A uniformed attendant held the door open. Joe flipped him a copper ringer. “I’m Dale Winters,” Joe said. “I ordered a coach.”

“Right this way,” the doorman said, leading them to one of the horse-drawn coaches parked at the curb. The attendant opened the door to the coach, and Joe gave the man another copper ringer as he climbed inside. Cole got settled beside Mira, across from Joe. The door closed, and the coach started rolling.



Joe's preparation impressed Cole. Having a coach waiting at a different hotel from where they were staying felt like the sort of clever precaution a secret agent would take. "The driver knows where we're going?" Cole asked.

"He does," Joe said. "Just as he knows we would prefer him not to observe us. He kept his eyes forward as we approached and boarded the coach." Opening his satchel, Joe revealed three party masks. He gave the glittery silver one to Mira, the blue one to Cole, and claimed the black one for himself. "Put them on."

Lifting the mask to his face, Cole pulled the slender blue chain around his head and slid one of the links into a hook on the other side. Looking out through the eyeholes limited his visibility a little. The mask covered all of his face besides his mouth and chin.

"Let's talk strategy," Joe said. "In a confidence lounge, information is currency. We all need to play the game, or we'll stand out. Fortunately, we're from out of town and have juicy rumors that should be of interest. We don't want to mention anything about who we are, and we should avoid topics surrounding the High King or his daughters."

"What about Honor?" Mira asked.

"Leave it to me to ask after Honor," Joe said. "I'll also secure an enchanter who can manage long-lasting seemings."

"Can I ask about my friends?" Cole wondered.

Joe paused. "I know finding them is important to you."

"It's important to me too," Mira said.

Joe gave a reluctant nod. "Keep it general. If the right opportunity comes up, mention that you heard the High King was sending new slaves with shaping talent abroad."

"What rumors can we share?" Cole asked.

"Present nothing as personal knowledge," Joe stressed. "Mention that you heard it from a reliable source, that sort of thing. You can talk about Carnag having fallen, and four hundred legionnaires visiting Skyport. You might vaguely mention shapecrafters. I'm interested to see if anyone knows about them. If somebody seems useful, share that Declan was flushed out from behind the Eastern Cloudwall. The information is good enough to work as

currency, and it won't hurt Declan—the High King already knows he was there. Besides, it might help our cause to remind people that the Grand Shapers are still around.”

“Should we spread the word that the High King imprisoned his daughters?” Cole asked. “We could tell everyone he faked their deaths. Won't people be outraged?”

“Most will ignore it as a dusty old theory,” Joe said. “If our real enemies hear the rumor, they will move swiftly to crush it. The timing is wrong to reveal Mira's true predicament.”

“What else should we ask about?” Mira inquired.

“Keep it hazy,” Joe said. “Check for news. Claim to be from elsewhere. It will ring true because most of your info is from Sambria. Try to get a sense for what is going on in Elloweer.”

“Do you think Honor's power is running wild?” Mira asked. “Does Elloweer have a Carnag?”

“I imagine Honor's shaping ability is taking form much as yours did,” Joe said. “Quima certainly hinted that would be the case. This is the place to find out about anomalies in the kingdom. Keep your ears open and your comments guarded. You will be among expert gossipmongers. They will read into everything you share. Try not to lie. These are difficult people to deceive.”

Before long, the coach turned down a bare alleyway and slowed to a stop. Joe barely had room to open the door and step down. Mira and Cole followed.

They had halted beside an unmarked door set in an otherwise blank wall. Joe knocked, and the door swung inward to reveal a hulking brute with a bad haircut. “Do you have an invitation?” the bouncer asked.

Joe produced a card and handed it over along with a platinum ringer. “I had to add another guest at the last minute. I hope that's all right.”

Furrowing his brow, the goliath studied the invitation and the ringer. “One moment.” The door closed.

“I can stay with the coach if it's a problem,” Cole said, feeling like a party crasher.

“No,” Joe said. “I want to get you inside and permanently disguised. If it requires a bigger bribe, we can afford it.”

The door opened. “Request granted,” the big guy announced, stepping aside. “Welcome to Shady Lane.”

Joe, Mira, and Cole entered. Behind him, Cole heard their coach continue down the alleyway. The door closed.

They stood in a small, stone room with an iron door on the far side. Two of the walls had rows of dark slits in them. Cole thought the narrow gaps looked sinister. People might spy through them, or shoot arrows, or leak poison gas. How had he ended up in a place like this? It seemed like a mission for a trained spy.

An efficient-looking man, neatly groomed and well-dressed, patted down Joe, then Cole, and finally Mira. He backed away and murmured into a small grate beside the iron door.

The door opened, and the man motioned for them to pass through. The next room was also made of solid stone, but it was larger and softened by carpets, draperies, and cushioned furniture. The walls had so many doors that Cole wondered if the room was surrounded by closets.

A bespectacled gentleman, who was probably in his sixties, greeted them. Though not very tall, he had a gangly build with large hands and feet. Cole found his strong cologne distracting.

“Welcome, esteemed guests,” he simpered, rubbing his hands together. “You have visited us before?”

Joe shook his head.

The gangly man perked up at this news. “Newcomers! How marvelous. At Shady Lane, we pride ourselves on unparalleled discretion. We have four chief lounges. Your appearance will change each time you pass to a new room. To begin, you’ll each enter your own changing room, remove your mask, place it in a trunk, lock it, take the key, and face the mirror. Once satisfied with your disguise, exit through the other door and follow the hall to the blue door. Any questions?”

Joe shook his head again. Cole wasn’t sure he could picture exactly what the man meant, but he didn’t want to be the only one to ask for clarification.

“This way,” the gangly man said, walking over to one of the doors on the right side of the room. “Young sir may enter the trident door.” A subtle trident symbol was embossed above a doorknob. The man opened the door, and Cole entered. The door closed.

Though he listened intently, Cole heard no further conversation from beyond the door. The changing room was soundproof, or close to it. Another door waited on the far side of the room. A full-length mirror hung on one of the side walls. A row of medium-size trunks hid the base of the opposite wall. Keys protruded from most of the locks. There were two empty keyholes.

Cole opened the leftmost trunk. He unhooked his mask, placed it inside, then shut the trunk, locked it, and removed the key. A trident and a swirly symbol decorated the key. The lock had a matching swirl.

Cole stood before the mirror. He looked exactly like himself, so he figured that whatever was going to happen hadn't started yet. Glancing around the room, Cole wondered if he was being watched. Somebody had to create the illusion. He didn't notice any peepholes. Maybe somebody was spying through the mirror, like in an interrogation room. Or maybe the illusion happened automatically. Could the mirror be magical?

As Cole gazed into the looking glass, his skin drooped and his hair thinned. His nose, ears, and lips expanded. His stomach gained mass and pooched out. Before he knew it, Cole was staring at a pudgy old man who bore no resemblance to him. The reflection moved when he moved, blinked when he blinked. If a disguise like this could become permanent, Ansel would never find him.

Looking down at himself, Cole found that he did not match the reflection. He appeared the same as when he had entered the room. But the figure in the mirror wore dapper clothes and had a very different build. Held in front of his face, Cole's hands looked normal, but in the mirror they were obviously older, with thicker fingers and liver spots. Evidently the illusion only tricked his eyes in the mirror.

Cole went out the door and into the hall. Thick fur coated the walls, ceiling, and floor. When he closed the door, the fur completely hid it. Feeling around through the fur, he could find no doorknob. The sensation of the fur

against his hand didn't feel quite right; like brushing through spiderwebs. He pressed a palm against the fur. His hand sank until he felt the cool flatness of a stone wall. Swiping his other hand through the fur, Cole found it gave no resistance. The hairy walls were an illusion.

Cole picked a direction and walked down the hall until he reached a dead end. Doubling back, he followed the hall when it elbowed left, then reached a blue door, the only interruption of a furry expanse.

From the other end of the hall came a pale woman with silver hair and a jewel on her forehead. Somewhat taller than Mira, Cole supposed it could be her. Or Joe for that matter.

Cole waved at her.

She waved back. "Is that you?" asked an unfamiliar female voice.

Cole realized the woman could be anyone. He didn't want a spy to trick him. How could he confirm her identity without revealing himself? "What does my name start with?" Cole asked.

"C?" the woman asked.

"You're M?" Cole checked.

She gave a nod. "You were a Sky Raider?"

"You once rode in a flying coffin."

The woman giggled. "You sound so different."

"You too," Cole said. "I sound the same to myself."

"Me too," Mira said. "Should we go through?"

"After you."

Mira opened the door.

## CHAPTER

# 8

## RUMORS

**T**he large room beyond the doorway contained several groupings of comfortable furniture. In one corner, a string quartet played an unfamiliar tune, their instruments expertly weaving melodies and harmonies. Two other doors led out of the room.

Cole immediately felt out of place. This looked like a party for sophisticated adults. He reminded himself that with his disguise, he didn't look like a kid anymore. Some of the others could be young too.

Excluding the musicians, he counted eight other people in the room. Two stood talking in a corner, three sat together on a single sofa, and three others huddled around a table. Of the strangest, one looked like a living statue carved from black stone, and another wore a purple robe and had the head of a parrot.

After passing through the doorway, Mira looked like a jolly Asian woman with a tall, elaborate hairdo full of combs. Facing him, Mira covered a giggle. Wondering what he looked like, Cole approached a mirror. He had the head of a warty toad with bulging yellow eyes. His military jacket sparkled with medals.

Cole couldn't resist a chuckle. The toad head was perfectly lifelike. It would be the best Halloween costume ever!

Mira joined the pair chatting in the corner. A bearded guy with an eye patch rose from the sofa and sauntered over to Cole. Nervous to begin the conversation, Cole reached out to shake his hand in greeting.

“No, no,” the man scolded gently. “No touching in here. You must be new.”

Cole lowered his hand uncomfortably. “Sorry. Nobody told me. First time.”

The man raised his bushy eyebrows. “Or you’re feigning inexperience.” He leaned closer and murmured something.

“I couldn’t hear you,” Cole said. “The music is a little loud.”

“It should be. Discourages eavesdropping. What song are you singing?”

Cole scrunched his eyebrows. How was he supposed to reply to such a random question? The guy was probably speaking in code. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Very well. What do you go by?”

“My name?”

“In the lounges I’m Hannibal. What do you go by?”

Cole hesitated. Should he make something up? Joe had warned him not to lie. “Nothing yet.”

Hannibal considered him for a moment, as if measuring his legitimacy. Cole found himself wondering what the man really looked like.

“Out with it, then,” Hannibal said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m from out of town,” Cole said. “I just want news.”

Hannibal gave a chuckle. “Don’t we all? Where did you come from?”

“Sambria, most recently,” Cole said.

“I’ll believe that, since Sambria is just across the river. Where in Sambria?”

Cole paused. How could he keep the answer vague? “Lots of places. I’ve been on the move.”

“Any news from Sambria?”

Cole thought about what to share. “Four hundred legionnaires visited the Sky Raiders.”

“What were they after?” Hannibal asked.

Cole wasn't sure how much to reveal. He wished he could have practiced this type of conversation ahead of time. "I heard they asked about a slave."

"One slave?" Hannibal asked.

"That's what I heard," Cole said.

"Four hundred legionnaires?"

"Supposedly."

"Did they find him?"

"I'm not sure," Cole said. "I don't think so." The man didn't seem particularly interested by his news. "How are things in Elloweer?"

"When was your last visit?" Hannibal asked.

"First time," Cole said.

"Welcome," Hannibal said. "The latest news is a disturbance up north. People are disappearing. Entire towns have been found empty."

"Really?" Cole asked.

"It eerily matches your trouble with Carnag in Sambria," Hannibal said. "But this only came to my attention two weeks ago."

"Somebody took down Carnag," Cole volunteered.

"I heard that," Hannibal replied. "Any idea who did it?"

"I'm not sure," Cole said. Was there anything he could share to sound less boring? "I heard some legionnaires were involved. What do people know about this new problem in Elloweer?"

"Very little," Hannibal said. "Nobody who gets close ever returns. Our leaders are already beginning to panic. Like I said, the problem reminds everyone of Carnag. Forgive me for prying, but what brings you to Elloweer, Master Toad?"

"I'm . . . um . . . visiting," Cole said.

"Surely you have some business here. Perhaps I can help. I have many friends."

"I'm with people," Cole said, trying not to give away anything. "I don't have business of my own."

"Your affairs are private," Hannibal said. "I understand. Should you wish to confide in me, I spend most of my time in this chamber. I expect to remain here for the next hour."



“Thanks,” Cole said, unsure how well he had done. Should he have given up a big secret? Should he have pressed harder for information? The bearded man returned to the sofa. Cole hadn’t noticed Mira leaving the room, but he no longer saw her. Everyone was engaged in conversation, so he decided to try his luck elsewhere.

He went through a door and entered a less formal lounge where people reclined on divans and huge pillows. Near one wall an attendant polished a counter, avoiding the food and drinks on display. In a corner, a man tapped a massive xylophone while a woman played a flute.

Once in the room, Cole could no longer detect any sound of the string quartet. Of the six other people in the room, only two were talking. One guy hovered near the food counter with a drink in his hand; an old woman napped on a divan; a plump man hunched over a circular ottoman, studying an arrangement of playing cards; and a coldly beautiful young lady sat regally in a huge armchair like an empress on her throne.

Crossing to one of the mirrors in the room, Cole found that he looked like a middle-aged Italian guy, short but muscular. Seeing the reflection helped Cole realize he didn’t need to let everyone know this was his first time in a confidence lounge. As long as he didn’t divulge important information, he could be anybody he wanted, act however he chose. He couldn’t do much worse than his first conversation. Maybe he’d do better if he loosened up.

Surveying the room, Cole tried to relax. The guy playing cards struck him as the most approachable. Cole walked over and sat near him. “How are you?”

The man didn’t look up from his game of solitaire. “Content. You?”

“Just looking for news.”

“I’m Stumbler. What are you called?”

“Dracula,” Cole answered for no good reason.

“Never heard of you,” Stumbler said. “What song do you sing?”

“Karaoke hits from the sixties, seventies, and eighties,” Cole tried.

The man looked up from his cards. “What nonsense are you talking? Go bother someone else before I complain to the management.”

Joe had warned Cole not to lie. Apparently, that included joking. So much for his experiment with relaxed improvisation. Cole decided to move on rather than risk really annoying Stumbler. He stood up to find the beautiful young woman staring at him. She wore a snug, glittering gown that reminded him of fish scales. She curled her finger, summoning him over.

As Cole drew near, he tried to remind himself that she could easily be an ugly old lady. Or even a grungy old man. He shouldn't let her looks intimidate him. He resolved to be more honest. Making up weird answers had gotten him nowhere.

The woman leaned forward and spoke in hushed tones. "I suspect the Rogue Knight might be the exiled Duke of Laramy."

"Wow," Cole said. "I have no idea what that means."

"Should I speak slower?" she teased.

"I don't know any of those people."

She blinked. "Surely you've heard of the Rogue Knight?"

"I haven't," Cole said. "This is my first visit to Elloweer."

She patted her hands together delightedly. "In truth?"

"Yeah. This is my first time in a confidence lounge."

"I hardly believe you, but let's pretend. I'm Vixen. Where do you come from, Mr. Mysterious?"

"Sambria."

"Distant parts of Sambria, if you haven't heard of the Rogue Knight."

"Far from Carthage," Cole said. "Who is this knight?"

"That is the question," she said. "His identity is a matter of much debate. The Rogue Knight became champion of a small community east of here. He has an insatiable urge for dueling and a knack for winning. He started with minor towns, but he has moved on to great cities. None of this sounds familiar?"

"No," Cole said. He wondered if what she was talking about had anything to do with the info they needed to help find Honor. It definitely didn't seem connected to Dalton or Jenna. He was tempted to cut her off and ask what he really wanted to know, but she seemed excited about this topic, so maybe if he let her discuss it, she would eventually get to something he cared about.

“The Rogue Knight shows no interest in settling down to enjoy the spoils of his victories. Six knights now follow him. Some say seven. They live like vagabonds. When the Rogue Knight unseats a champion, he sacks the alderman and grants all taxes to the common people of the town. No officials or nobility get a copper bit. Over a short span, the Rogue Knight has become quite the man of the people. As you might expect, his list of enemies grows quite long.”

“Shouldn’t he be called the Rogue Champion?” Cole asked.

“One could make that argument,” Vixen said. “But none of the lords or champions of Elloweer wish to bestow that honor upon him. He does not behave like a champion. They say he robs travelers. Some cities have declared him an outlaw. He is wreaking havoc with our government.”

“You don’t like him?”

“I would give my right arm to meet him,” she gushed immediately. “My opinions have not yet crystallized. I burn with curiosity. I agree with our nobility that the man is a scoundrel, but you must admit there is something horribly romantic about such boldness.”

Cole thought it sounded like the Rogue Knight had a groupie. “You know who he is?”

“Nobody has seen him without his armor,” Vixen said. “His helmet conceals his face. But he could be the Duke of Laramy. It fits. The duke was a vocal advocate of the common people, and he often flouted convention. They say he died, but what if that was a ruse to conceal his new identity?”

“So it’s a theory,” Cole said.

“At the very least,” she replied. “At best it is a brilliant deduction. The Duke of Laramy was notoriously handsome.”

“Are there other theories?”

“Dozens. But here I am overflowing with gossip without asking after Sambria.”

“Carnag fell.”

“As we well know,” Vixen replied. “The slayer of the fiend remains unannounced.”

“I heard some legionnaires helped.”

She waved away the information like it was a bothersome fly. “Are you really so devoid of knowledge? Don’t you know something juicy? Then we could truly talk.”

Cole leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “I heard that Declan, the Grand Shaper of Sambria, was chased out of hiding.”

“No!” she said. “How certain is this?”

“It’s reliable.”

“Some have surmised that Declan would have passed on by now.”

“He’s alive and well. He was hiding behind the Eastern Cloudwall.”

She gasped. “At the Brink? Absurd.”

“I guess there was space back there,” Cole said. “He found a way in and built a fort. A bunch of legionnaires flushed him out.”

“Declan got away?”

“Nobody knows where he went. But I heard they almost had him.”

“These are indeed novel tidings,” Vixen said. “Substantial if not scandalous. Very well, I owe you something remarkable. Since we’ve visited the topic of the Rogue Knight, I will impart recent developments that are not yet public.”

“Okay,” Cole said, a little disappointed that she was still focused on the knight and didn’t have anything else to reveal.

“From a dependable source close to the matter, I hear that the Rogue Knight has challenged none other than Rustin Sage, champion of Merriston.”

“Where is that?” Cole asked.

She chuckled as if he were kidding. “Don’t pretend ignorance of our capital. Do you wish me to believe you are a stranger or a fool?”

“I really am a stranger,” Cole said. “When is the fight?”

“Postponed indefinitely,” Vixen said, her voice low and excited. “Rustin refuses to acknowledge the Rogue Knight’s right to challenge him, and he has the full backing of the governor. Naturally, this is all being kept quiet. No champion wants to seem afraid to fight.”

“Is he afraid?” Cole asked.

“The Rogue Knight has slain too many proven champions, including Gart the Headsman, who everyone thought would rule Cirestra unchallenged until

he died or stepped down. Can you imagine if the capital's taxes were completely dispersed among the common folk? It would cripple the government. Anarchy would result. Chaos. The cities the Rogue Knight has taken have either plunged into confusion or else have quietly ignored his edicts. I have it on good authority that the capital will use all necessary means to deny the Rogue Knight his duel."

"Interesting," Cole said, still unsure whether the knowledge was relevant to his problems.

Vixen whispered for the first time. Cole could barely hear her over the music. "If you're as new as you act, be careful where you repeat those tidings. For example, Stumbler over there is one of Henrick's knights. He would not appreciate such tales being spread. When they're not killing one another, champions tend to stick together, especially on the matter of the Rogue Knight."

"That guy's a knight?" Cole asked.

"He's much younger and stronger than he looks," she assured him.

"I guess anything is possible in here," Cole said. "He could even be a girl."

"Not so," Vixen corrected him. "They keep the seemings at Shady Lane true to your gender. House rules."

A bony old woman shuffled over to them. Cole had not seen her enter the room. One of her eyes was notably larger than the other. "We should talk, sir," she offered.

"And who might you be?" Vixen challenged.

"Nobody to worry about," the old woman said. "Anyone here who lives on Upton Street should mind her own business."

Eyes darting to Cole, Vixen looked shocked. She forced a smile.

The old woman stepped close to Cole. "Seriously, follow me."

Cole wasn't sure what to do. The old woman seemed intrusive and probably dangerous. "Why me?"

She brought her dry lips to his ear. "I'm from Arizona too."

## CHAPTER

# 9

## JILL

**S**o excited and curious that he could hardly keep his mouth shut, Cole followed the old woman. She led him to a side of the room away from either of the doors and stepped through the wall. The dark wooden panels looked completely solid. Extending a hand through the illusion, Cole experienced a faint sensation similar to penetrating cobwebs, and then went through.

He entered a cozy space with framed art on the walls. A round table and four chairs served as the only furnishings. The old woman sat down in one of the chairs, and Cole sat next to her.

“Okay, we can actually talk now,” she said. “This is one of the secret unmonitored rooms.”

“You’re really from Arizona?” Cole asked, desperate for an explanation. “Who are you?”

“I’m from Mesa,” she said. “I got kidnapped with you, Cole! This is crazy! I can’t believe you’re here! I’m Jill Davis.”

“I know you!” Cole exclaimed. “You’re a seventh grader!” He had seen her in the halls at school last year. She had sung in the talent show. He’d finally found one of the kids from his slave caravan! He tried to picture how she really looked under the illusion. It wasn’t easy to overrule his eyes. “Your brother is in my grade.”

“Jeff,” Jill said. “We used to trick-or-treat together. He was off with his own friends this Halloween. I’m so relieved he isn’t stuck here, but I keep wondering what would have happened if he’d been with me—maybe I wouldn’t have ended up here, either. Don’t you have a brother too?”

“Sister,” Cole corrected. “Chelsea—she’s a pain, but I miss her, anyway.”

“I know the feeling.”

Cole blinked, still trying to put Jill Davis’s face onto this old woman’s. “How’d you recognize me?” he asked, feeling off-balance.

“I was helping the enchanter who prepped you when you first came in,” she said. “We can see into almost all the rooms here, even the changing rooms. Not to watch people take off their clothes or anything. They just remove their masks, then we change how they look. I couldn’t believe it when I saw you!”

“What are you doing here?” Cole asked.

“I was going to ask you the same thing!” Her excited tone and posture didn’t match her aged features. “The slavers sold you first, before we got to Five Roads. The buyer took you somewhere in Sambria. Sky something, I think. Ansel made it sound really scary.”

“That’s right,” Cole said, unsure how much he should reveal. She’d already said the other rooms were watched. How could she be sure this one wasn’t? “I went to Skyport and joined the Sky Raiders. But I earned my freedom.”

“Really?” Jill replied. “So quickly? Did somebody buy you and free you?”

“Sort of,” Cole said. “It’s a long story. What about you?”

“I went to Junction City,” she said. “They took the kids with shaping talent. Nineteen of us. We all met the High King. He was . . . well, it was pretty scary. They gave us tests, then sent us off to different kingdoms based on our abilities. Your friend Dalton came with me to Elloweer.”

“He’s here?” Cole asked, thunderstruck.

“Not in Carthage,” Jill clarified. “They sent him to train at a confidence lounge in Merriston.”

“The capital?”

“I guess it’s a big deal for them to send someone there,” she said. “He’s really great at illusions.”

Cole could hardly believe the precious information he was getting. Dalton was in the capital of Elloweer? He could make seemings? The task of finding his friends had started to seem hopeless. “What about Jenna?”

“Jenna Hunt? I’m not sure where she went. She came to Junction City with us. Once they split us up based on our abilities, we never saw the kids in the other groups. She isn’t in Elloweer.”

“Do you know the name of the confidence lounge where Dalton went?”

Jill scrunched her brow. “I did. I’ve never been there. It’s been a while since I heard it. The Silver something. Deer, maybe? No. It was Silver something, though.”

“That’s great,” Cole said. For the first time, he had a solid lead about Dalton!

“Are you really free to go visit him?” Jill asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said.

She bit her lip. “You’re so lucky, being free. Dalton belongs to the High King now, just like I do. And the king is basically the emperor of this whole world. You should see his castle! He has zillions of soldiers, and some of them have shaping powers. You don’t want to get on his bad side. If you’d met him, you’d understand.”

“I know how bad he is,” Cole said, thinking of Mira. “But there’s got to be a way to get you and Dalton free, like I got free.”

Jill’s eyes filled with hope. “All I’ve thought about is someone getting me out of here.” Her expression wilted. “But, Cole, I don’t know if anyone’s told you . . . They say we can’t get back home, no matter what. That even if we find a way there, we won’t be able to stay—we’ll always get drawn back here. If I snuck off, I’d be a runaway slave with no place to go.”

Resting his elbows on the table, Cole bowed his face into his hands. He knew the High King was powerful. And he’d also known there was no way for them to get home permanently. Even if that was true, did it mean they shouldn’t try to find each other? Did they have to accept slavery as a way of life? Who could say for sure there was no way of escaping the Outskirts?



“I’m not trying to get you down,” Jill said. “You were really brave trying to help us back at the wagons. I wanted Tracy to die after what she did to you. But we’re stuck here, Cole. Dalton and I are marked slaves. If we rebel, it’ll just get worse. I saw someone try once, and . . . it was bad.” She shivered, clearly disturbed by the memory.

Cole leaned toward Jill across the table and lowered his voice. “You don’t want me to bust you out of here?”

Jill regarded him anxiously. “Are you kidding? Of course I do! You’re the first person from our world I’ve seen since coming here. But how can we do it without getting caught?”

“Let me talk to my friends,” Cole said. “We can figure it out.”

Jill’s wrinkled features contorted with worry. “Who are your friends? Are they powerful enough to keep us safe from the High King?”

“We’ve made it this far,” Cole said, unsure how much he should share. He didn’t want to put Mira in danger, but he needed to give Jill some confidence. “They’re members of the resistance. Working in a place like this, you must have heard of them.”

“I have,” she said, her face paling. “Cole, you’re in tons of danger! The High King does awful things to anyone he catches who’s a part of that.”

Cole tried to hold his frustration in check. He had finally found someone from home, and she was clearly scared to leave. What if she was too scared to come with him? Was he supposed to just leave her here?

He tried to recall everything he knew about Jill. His sparse memories of her mostly involved her chatting with friends. Since she was a grade higher, he’d never known her well. He seemed to remember her brother, Jeff, making fun of her because she never learned to swim. Jeff had claimed she was scared to put her head under the water. Cole guessed if she’d been a nervous person back home, she’d only be more anxious here. Still, he had to try to convince her.

“So you’re just going to stay in this place?” Cole asked. “Seriously? With all these people you don’t even really know? Haven’t you thought about running away before?”

“Of course I’ve thought about escaping,” Jill said, lowering her voice. She looked torn. “I don’t know, Cole. Sooner or later, runaways get caught, and then things get really ugly. I told you, I’ve seen it.”

“Bad?” Cole asked.

“The punishments are harsh,” Jill said. “Probably to scare the rest of us from trying the same thing. It kind of works.”

“I can’t promise everything will be easy if you come with us,” Cole admitted, thinking of what he and his friends had already been through and the risks of traveling with Mira. “But it has to be better than staying here.”

“Slaves who can shape don’t live so badly,” she argued. “Don’t get me wrong—all I want is to be back home. But if I’m stuck here, do I have to make it even harder? At least making seemings is kind of fun.”

“Doesn’t being a slave kind of wreck the fun?”

Jill flushed. “I guess I try not to think about it all the time.” She narrowed her gaze. “Tell the truth. Are you actually a runaway?”

“No,” Cole assured her. “I really got free.”

“Then wouldn’t having me around make everything more dangerous for you?”

“What if we bought you?” Cole suggested. “We could do that with Dalton too. My friends have money.”

Jill looked excited for a second, then her face dropped. “I don’t think I’m for sale—the High King seemed super interested in keeping the slaves he bought for himself.” She hesitated. “I can’t believe you’re free. That never happens.”

“I had help,” Cole said. “Why did the High Shaper send you here? Does he run this place?”

“The High King has people controlling all the legal confidence lounges,” she said. “It’s where a lot of the top enchanters find work. But if you’re mixed up with rebels, Shady Lane probably isn’t safe for you.”

“Did the High King hurt any of you?” Cole asked. “Did he mess with your powers?”

“Mess with our powers?”

Cole looked around the room, then took another chance. “Have you heard of shapecraft?”

“You mean shaping?”

“No. Shapecraft is when people shape the shaping ability. The High King may just be training you so he can steal your shaping powers and do weird experiments on you.”

“What?” Jill exclaimed.

“He’s done it to others,” Cole said. “Reliable sources have told me his shapecraft experiments will only get worse.”

“Thanks for telling me,” she said, her voice hushed. “I haven’t heard of shapecraft, but I’ll be extra careful.”

“Do your bosses know we’re talking?” Cole asked.

“Not officially,” Jill said. “I didn’t let on that I knew you. They tell us to enter the lounges in disguise if somebody seems interesting. The owners are as eager for secrets as anyone who comes here. My bosses always have a few regulars out there mingling. We also listen through the walls, ceilings, and floors as best we can. We learn all sorts of things. If somebody asks about us talking, I’ll say you made me curious because I’d never seen you here before. Most of our clients visit regularly. I’ll tell anyone who bothers me about it that you’re just some traveler looking for news.”

“That’s true,” Cole said. “I really am traveling. I’m only here today because I’m tagging along with some people.”

“Yeah . . . maybe you should dump those people, though. If you don’t, you could end up in jail. Or worse.”

Cole didn’t want her to worry, and he definitely didn’t want her to know too much about his actual situation, in case someone forced the information out of her later. “The people I know aren’t super involved in the resistance,” he lied.

“Just watch out,” Jill said. “They crack down hard on those people.” She wrung her hands. “I hope your friends are really careful. Cole, this is a dangerous place. We shouldn’t talk much longer. I just—I really don’t want you to go.”

Cole wished he knew the right thing to do. He hated leaving her here, but he could tell she was too afraid to come. His top priority was to find Dalton and help Jenna. “Do you know anything else about anyone from our world?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I just know the other kids they sent to Elloweer. Melissa Scott went to a confidence lounge in Wenley, and Tom Eastman went to a lounge in Stowbarth. I’m always hoping I’ll hear more, but I never do. That’s why I was so excited to see you!”

Cole suddenly remembered the other huge question that had brought him to the confidence lounge. “I heard something is making people disappear. Do you know anything about that?”

“There was a creature called Carnag in Sambria,” she said. “Some kind of monster. People think this new problem might be related, but nobody really gets what’s happening. We still don’t understand where Carnag came from either. Some people think it was a shaper who went nova.”

“You haven’t heard about any famous prisoners, have you?” Cole asked. “Secret ones? Maybe recent ones.”

Jill clenched her hands tighter. “There are always prisoners,” she said. “It’s not the kind of thing you should get too interested in if you want to stay free.”

It was obvious that the High King’s tactics had already worked perfectly on Jill—she was scared not only for herself, but for anyone who might cross him.

“I’m most interested in visiting Dalton,” Cole said. “Not to rescue him,” he added hastily. “I don’t want to get him into trouble. But I miss him. He’s my best friend.”

Her expression softened. “If you head to Merriston, watch out for the Rogue Knight. They say he’s been stealing from travelers.”

“I don’t have much to steal,” Cole said. “But thanks for the warning. The lady I was just talking to told me about the Rogue Knight. Is she trustworthy?”

“Vixen?” Jill asked. “Hard to say for sure. Her real name is Mavis Proffin. Have you heard of her?”

Cole shook his head.

“She’s a regular—the wife of a local official. Vixen is much older than she looks. It’s arranged so that she gets gorgeous disguises. She mostly cares about social gossip, but she’s no dummy, and she’s in a position to hear a lot.”

“Got it,” Cole said.

Jill glanced around furtively, even though they were still alone. “It’s so good to see you, Cole. You have no idea. I wish we could talk more, but if anyone notices this conversation going long, they might get suspicious, especially if I don’t have any info.”

“The Grand Shaper Declan was hiding behind the Eastern Cloudwall,” Cole said. “Legionnaires chased him out. That’s the best info I have.”

“You don’t mind if I share that?” she asked.

“Not if it helps you.”

“Thanks.”

“You won’t come with me?” Cole tried.

Jill looked miserable. “I can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

Cole sighed. “Okay, I get it.”

“I wish we could meet up somewhere and hang out. I don’t have privileges to go out yet.” She paused. “If you figure out how to get us back home, you’ll come back for me, right?”

“Of course!” Cole promised. “Are you sure you’re okay here?”

“Okay enough,” Jill said. “I think it’s safer than trying to leave. At least for now.”

“All right,” Cole said. “I won’t forget you. I’ll help you if I can.”

“I won’t forget you, either,” she said, failing to hide the desperation behind her words. “You’re really brave, Cole. I know you’re trying to do the right thing. It’s lucky you got free. That doesn’t happen much. Don’t mess it up.”

He stared at the face of the old woman, trying to visualize the real Jill. He doubted whether his mind’s eye was getting it quite right.

“Bye, Jill,” Cole said, his voice a little husky.

“See you, Cole.” There was no mistaking the deep emotion beneath her casual words.

Cole didn’t want to leave her, but he knew the time had come. He walked through the illusory wall and back into the lounge with the xylophone. Vixen

glanced his way, as did Stumbler. Deciding that his disappearance through the wall had drawn too much attention, Cole strode across the room and into a new one. People milled about as a guy patted tall bongos. Mind brimming with new knowledge, Cole crossed to another door. Each new room meant a new physical appearance. He hoped his hasty tour would make it hard for onlookers to keep track of him, then wondered if Jill was still watching.

The next room contained people at gaming tables. Some played cards. Others rolled dice. At one table they appeared to be racing caterpillars. Cole didn't linger.

After the next door, Cole ended up back where he had started. Most of the same faces were present, including Hannibal and the guy who looked like a statue. In the mirror, Cole found that he looked like a skinny teen with lots of freckles and really big ears.

A gentleman with white curly hair cornered Cole and struck up a conversation, but the man was boring. Cole shared his routine information and learned nothing of interest.

After the gentleman ambled away, Cole claimed a solitary chair. He couldn't keep his mind off Jill. She was the first person he had met from back home since leaving the slave caravan. And now he was leaving her behind because she was too scared to join him.

What if Dalton felt the same way? What if Jenna didn't want to be rescued? What if trying to save them made everything worse?

No. He couldn't think that way. Not everyone would be as wary as Jill. Cole knew that wherever he had ended up as a slave, he would have fought to get free. He felt certain that Dalton would leap at the chance to escape as well. And now he had a real chance of finding him! What about Jenna? Maybe Dalton would know something. In his gut, Cole believed that Jenna would want to run away too, whatever the risks.

But first he had to get away from Shady Lane. As he sat alone in the chair, Cole realized he wasn't sure how to find Mira or Joe to learn whether they were ready to leave. How would he recognize them? Were they still here? If he left too early, would he end up alone on the streets of East Carthage?

Cole decided they would have worked very quickly if they were already gone, and he figured they probably wouldn't take off without him. His best option was probably to stay put and watch for people exiting.

A new person came into the lounge from outside, talked to Hannibal, and moved on. A freakishly thin woman entered from a neighboring room and briskly exited. Cole continued to wait, feeling edgier as the minutes passed.

A man and a woman came into the room from the gaming lounge. The handsome man had black hair slicked back and a small mustache. The woman had green skin and snakes for hair. She pointed at the ceiling, softly said, "Away," then scanned the room.

Hair squirming, the woman watched as Cole approached. "I know a guy named Twitch," Cole said quietly.

"I know Jace," she replied. It had to be Mira, which meant the guy was Joe.

"We should go," Joe murmured.

"What about a permanent illusion?" Cole asked.

"Not here," Joe whispered tersely.

They exited together. In the furry hall, a previously unseen door appeared ahead of them. They went through, then through another, and found themselves back in the room with the gangly bespectacled man.

"May I see your keys?" the man inquired.

After a look at Cole's key, the man escorted him to the trident door.

"Once you retrieve your things, put on your mask and return to this room," the man instructed. "Please leave the key behind."

Cole did as requested, leaving his key in the lock of the trunk. He met up with masked Mira and Joe, and they left the room together through a different door from the one they had originally entered. Cole desperately wanted to share what he had learned from Jill, but decided he had better wait until they were alone. Two large men escorted them down a staircase, along a plain hall, then up some stairs to a door. They walked out to find themselves in an alley with their coach waiting.

Joe, Mira, and Cole climbed into the coach, and the large men shut the door. Once they were rolling, Joe took off his mask. Mira and Cole followed

his example.

“I saw someone from home!” Cole announced, barely able to contain his excitement.

“Really?” Mira asked.

“A girl named Jill, from my school,” Cole explained. “She’s a slave—some kind of apprentice in training. She told me where I can find my friend Dalton!”

“That’s wonderful!” Mira exclaimed. “Where is he?”

“At a confidence lounge in Merriston,” Cole said. “The Silver something. Jill wouldn’t come with us, even though I tried to convince her, but I know where she is now, so I can come back for her.”

“Good information,” Joe approved. “I met with one of the Unseen. Apparently, the main confidence lounges in Carthage have fallen under heavy government supervision. He warned that it would be too dangerous to hire any of the enchanters working there. He gave me the name of an illusionist who can help us—Verilan the Incredible, a prominent local performer. We’ll go to his show tonight and meet him afterward. Did either of you pick up any leads about a valuable secret prisoner?”

Cole shook his head.

“I heard a lot about the Rogue Knight,” Mira said. “People are also talking about a big threat in the north. People are vanishing. They suspect it’s an Ellowine Carnag.”

“It’s a safe bet that Honor’s power is on the prowl,” Joe said. “My contact thought this illusionist could have some good information for us. He also warned me that Enforcers have started making inquiries about a girl and three boys traveling together, perhaps with an adult male. The contact guessed that I was the adult male in question, and I made no attempt to dissuade him.”

“Did he know who I was?” Mira asked.

“He hadn’t heard your name,” Joe said. “But he had seen a sketch of your face. Sounds like the Enforcers are pretty sure we’re here. One of their best is coming to personally oversee the manhunt. They call him the Hunter. He’s infamous. Most Enforcers limit their work to specific kingdoms. Hunter runs operations in all five. Chances are he has some unusual shaping abilities.”



“Or shapecraft skills,” Cole said.

“Nothing would surprise me,” Joe said. “In short, we need to hurry and disguise your faces, then we need to get out of town.”

## CHAPTER

# 10

## ILLUSIONIST

“I love illusionists,” Twitch said, fingers drumming on his knees. “With all the trouble we’re in, I can’t believe we’re on our way to a show.”

“We’re not after laughs,” Mira said. “The right disguises could help us avoid a lot of trouble.”

They had boarded a coach in front of a museum several blocks from their inn. Joe thought the vehicle would help mask their arrival and departure. It was not the same coach they had used to visit the confidence lounge.

“But meanwhile we get a show,” Twitch enthused. “I’ve loved dazzle shows ever since I was little. They make the impossible come true.”

“Illusionists fake the impossible,” Jace scoffed. “They fool your eyes. Big deal.”

“The good ones make it seem real,” Twitch insisted. “You know they’re tricking you, but it looks amazing. The point is to be entertained.”

“Verilan charges a lot for his services,” Joe said. “The show will display the quality of his seemings. Enjoy it. Just don’t forget that the real purpose tonight is to get disguises for Mira and Cole. We need to be alert.”

“I’m excited for the show,” Cole said. “I’ve never seen a magic act done by an actual illusionist.”

“How could you put on a dazzle show without an illusionist?” Jace asked.

“We have magicians in my world even though nobody can shape,” Cole said. “They pull off some cool tricks with just skill and special props.”

Jace snorted. “This will crush anything people can do without shaping.”

“Here we are,” Joe said. “Stay close to me.”

The coach slowed and then stopped. Joe opened the door. Cole exited last.

The mirror surface of the building reflected everything in intense shades of electric light. As he moved toward the front doors, Cole saw his reflection blazing a brilliant green. Everyone in the crowd reflected as a different glaring hue.

Beyond the doors, they passed through a lobby where the floor simulated a pond teeming with decorative fish. Despite the authentic appearance, there was no sensation of wetness as Cole walked across it. This already looked way cooler than the magic shows he’d seen on TV back home. Chelsea had always been into that stuff. He wondered what she would think of this.

In the performance hall, rows of benches flowed up and away from a semicircular stage. The hall was small enough to have no terrible seats, but Joe led them to a prime bench just right of center, about ten rows from the front.

Watching the stage expectantly, eager audience members chatted with neighbors. Cole longed to share in the atmosphere of anticipation instead of trying to wish himself invisible. Everyone who saw his face represented a potential risk. After taking his seat, he hunched forward and lowered his head.

Cole had worried that Twitch’s insectile appearance would draw unwanted attention, but about one in every dozen members of the crowd looked as bizarre as Twitch or worse. A guy just a few seats down on their row had a huge, lipless mouth with triangular sharklike teeth.

Audience members were still trickling in when a guy strode out onto the stage. Though not a large man, his leopard-print vest showed off a chiseled torso and arms. He wore his long, blond hair tied back in a ponytail. His tan skin looked lightly sunburned. The audience cheered.

After absorbing the adulation for a moment, the performer raised his arms to calm the outburst. “Find your seats at your leisure,” he called. “The starting time didn’t apply to you. Nobody is bothered by your tardiness.”

The audience laughed, and he flashed a winning smile. Extending one arm, a large hoop appeared in his hand. When he moved the hoop in front of himself, all portions of him visible through the circle appeared to be a curvy woman. He raised the hoop high off to one side, then swung it down, and a shapely brunette appeared beside him, waving to the crowd. She smiled, but there was no warmth behind it.

“Meet Madeline, my lovely assistant this evening,” the man said. “And I am . . .” He cupped a hand behind his ear.

“Verilan the Incredible!” the audience shouted.

“The what?” Verilan asked, brows knitted in befuddlement.

“Incredible!” the audience roared, Twitch among the loudest.

Verilan and his assistant proceeded to work wonders. Juggled swords turned into clouds of butterflies. Water leaped from one container to another until bucket by bucket and barrel by barrel Verilan created an elaborate fountain. On a huge canvas, Verilan painted birds that came to life and swooped around the performance hall. Madeline and Verilan danced together above a sea of flame. Cole was pretty sure Chelsea would have been on the edge of her seat. Too bad he didn’t have a phone to take some videos for her!

At one point, Verilan called for volunteers. It took a hard scowl from Joe to make Twitch lower his hand. The chosen man was placed inside of a cabinet. Verilan proceeded to fold the cabinet into a tiny cube and swallow it. Later in the show, Verilan carved a huge block of wood until it came to life as the missing audience member. The confused man returned to his seat.

Cole was delighted by the quality and variety of illusions. He could see why Twitch loved dazzle shows. No show on Earth could compare.

After countless marvels, Verilan announced his most dangerous trick. The lighting dimmed. Three empty cages were wheeled onto the stage and spaced with a good distance between each of them. Verilan escorted Madeline into one of the cages. After a blinding flash, a huge leopard replaced Madeline in her cage, and she now occupied a different one. Another flash, and Madeline moved to the final cage, leaving behind another leopard. A third flash removed Madeline from the stage, leaving only Verilan and three caged leopards.

The applause broke up as one of the leopards began heaving against the side of the cage. Verilan tried to keep smiling, but he looked distressed. White foam dripped from the leopard's jaws. Fluid muscles heaving, the leopard burst from the cage and rushed Verilan, biting his chest and shaking him violently.

Cole tried to jump to his feet, but Joe's extended arm held him down. "Wait," Joe ordered.

Trailing horrible amounts of blood, Verilan tore away from the ferocious leopard. The other two leopards burst from their cages as well. Verilan collapsed, and the leopards pounced, viciously tearing into him until nothing remained but his ruined vest.

Madeline rushed onto the stage carrying the hoop from the beginning of the show. A leopard charged her, and she held up the hoop like a shield. When the leopard sprang through the hoop, it disappeared. Madeline used the same technique to dispose of the other two leopards.

Setting the hoop aside, Madeline crouched over the bloody remnants of Verilan's vest. Scooping the tattered material together, she molded the rags into a small cube. Then she unfolded the cube into the cabinet from earlier, opened it, and out came Verilan, shirtless but otherwise unscathed.

The crowd went wild. Cole clapped and whistled along with them. Illusion or not, it was the coolest trick he had ever seen.

Verilan reached into the hoop and pulled out a leopard-print vest. After putting it on, he passed the hoop over Madeline, and she disappeared. Waving good-bye, he raised the hoop over his head like an oversized halo and dropped it. As the hoop fell, Verilan vanished.

The cages exploded into flocks of origami birds. As the paper swans, sparrows, owls, and eagles soared overhead, they burst into colorful flames and disappeared. A rotund announcer came onto the stage, thanked everyone for coming, and asked for the crowd to exit in an orderly fashion.

"That was awesome," Cole said to Twitch.

"Best I've ever seen," Twitch gushed. "That guy can do anything."

"He's good," Mira agreed. "There are limits to how many illusions one person can generate, and how elaborate they can be. Verilan has serious talent."

“I agree,” Jace said.

“You liked it?” Cole asked, surprised.

Jace shrugged. “I pictured card tricks and dancing lights. Simpler stuff. It was better than I expected.”

“What now?” Mira asked, turning to Joe.

“We wait,” Joe said. “Keep talking to one another. We want to look like we’re casually lingering. Let everyone clear out.”

Cole and Twitch discussed their favorite parts of the show. Cole had seldom seen Twitch so enthusiastic and let him do most of the talking.

Before long the room had emptied except for Cole and his friends. The rotund announcer approached them. “Show’s over, folks.”

Joe stood up. “I have an appointment with Verilan.”

“Do you now?” the announcer said, looking him up and down. “We use passwords for such things.”

“Seeming is believing,” Joe replied.

The announcer unclasped a bracelet from his wrist, and suddenly he was Verilan. “Now you’re speaking my language,” Verilan said with a toothy smile. “And who are these young people?”

“This is your biggest fan,” Jace said, indicating Twitch.

Twitch wilted under the attention. “I really liked the show,” he said softly, avoiding eye contact.

“I aim to please,” Verilan said warmly. “We should go backstage.”

Twitch shot Cole an excited glance.

They followed Verilan to the front of the performance hall, onto the stage, and back into one of the wings. Catwalks crisscrossed above them. Cole passed bulky props, tall black curtains, and numerous ropes that stretched up toward the high ceiling.

Verilan led them to a plain door. Behind it they found an untidy dressing room lit by white globes. Madeline awaited them in her form-fitting stage outfit. They all entered, and Verilan closed the door.

“Are these your after-hours clients?” Madeline asked.

“Yes,” Verilan said. “I understand you want two permanent disguises?”

Joe glanced uncertainly at Madeline.

“Relax,” Verilan said. “We’re a team.”

“For two of the kids,” Joe explained, indicating Cole and Mira. “We need seemings that can withstand scrutiny from skilled enchanters.”

Verilan gave a chuckle. “No seeming is flawless, friend. But mine rival the best.”

“That’s why we came to you,” Joe said.

“My services don’t come cheap,” Verilan said. “Two platinum each.”

“Two each?” Joe exclaimed. “My contact said it would be a lot, but that’s outrageous.”

Verilan grinned. “Nobody made you come to me. If you care to hunt for a better value elsewhere, be my guest.”

“I can pay.” Joe sighed. “Go ahead.”

“Why throw away so many ringers on a couple of kids?” Madeline asked.

“Our business is our own,” Joe said.

“Not if you involve me,” Verilan said. “If my cover gets blown, I become a wanted man. I need to know who I’m working with and why. Are the kids going to be used as spies? Are they fugitives? If they get into trouble, could it get traced back to me? What’s the story?”

The blatant curiosity made Cole uncomfortable. He shared a look with Mira and Joe.

“Knowing the whole story will greatly increase your level of risk,” Joe said. “I’m a member of the Unseen. Can’t we leave it at that?”

“Afraid not,” Madeline said. “We’ve heard the Enforcers are looking for four kids travelling with a grown-up. But we have no details.”

“They’re looking for us,” Joe said. “The kids are wanted. Isn’t that enough?”

“Not if we’re doing business together,” Verilan said. “We prefer the risks of knowledge to the risks of ignorance.”

Joe turned to Mira.

She stepped forward. “I’m Miracle Pemberton, daughter of Stafford, High Shaper of the five kingdoms. I’m the same age I was when my father stole my shaping abilities, faked my death, and tried to lock me away. I’ve lived in hiding for years. We’re on the run.”

Madeline glanced at Verilan. "Could this be true?" She squinted at Mira. "You have the aura of a powerful shaper."

"I recently got my abilities back," Mira said. "They're more useful in Sambria."

"What about your sisters?" Madeline asked.

"I don't know," Mira said. "We've been hiding separately for years. I'm here because Honor is in trouble. We think she may have been captured."

Madeline shook her head in astonishment. "Can you verify your identity?"

"Most of the people who knew me are now old or dead," Mira said. "I still have my royal seal. Each of the daughters had one. My mother smuggled them to us before we were sent into exile."

Mira produced an engraved golden disk fastened to a chain and embellished with tiny diamonds. It was the first Cole had heard of it.

Madeline accepted the seal, waved a hand over it, then peered at it closely. She handed it to Verilan, who took a long look as well.

Verilan sank to one knee, head bowed. Madeline followed his lead. "Your Highness," he said gravely. "We had not dared to hope that you survived."

"It's the High Shaper's most closely guarded secret," Joe said. "You may have shortened your lives by learning it."

"You tried to warn us," Madeline said thoughtfully.

"Please, rise," Mira offered.

Verilan and Madeline stood.

"Who are you?" Verilan asked Cole.

After Mira's introduction, he felt like any description he gave would sound anticlimactic. "I'm not a princess."

"He's a wanted slave who came here from Outside," Joe clarified.

"He's with us now," Mira added. "A trusted ally."

"This is the wildest news we've had in years," Madeline said with breathless excitement. "I'm in the inner circle of the Unseen, but I never heard a whisper of it."

"We're very careful about sharing this knowledge," Joe said. "Their mother kept the secret to herself for a great while. Only recently has she reached out to a few among the Unseen. Many of our most trusted members



have no idea. The information is only shared when the need is most dire. I'm serving as her protector."

"Think of what this could mean to the revolution," Verilan murmured.

"We're well aware," Joe said. "First priority is to secure the other princesses. Do you have any information about recent Ellowine prisoners surrounded by the highest levels of secrecy and security?"

Madeline put a hand to her mouth. "Blackmont Castle."

Verilan nodded. "In Edgemont. They're keeping a nameless prisoner there under unusually strict guard."

"Edgemont is just outside of Merriston," Joe told Mira. "It's in line with the marker that initially guided us."

"Marker?" Madeline asked.

"Until recently, we had an indicator that pointed toward Honor's location," Joe said. "It no longer functions."

"Our best spies only know that the prisoner exists," Madeline said. "None have managed to confirm the identity. There has been much speculation about what prisoner would demand such extreme precautions. It must be her."

"It's our first good lead in some time," Joe said. "Thank you."

Cole felt relieved that the lead was near Merriston. That meant finding Dalton could stay his top priority without pulling everyone else off course from searching for Honor.

"It's the least we could do," Madeline said. "Your secrets require more trust than I expected. I want to share mine."

"Are you sure?" Verilan asked.

"Positive," she replied. "My name is not Madeline. I'm Skye. I change my appearance every few months, as if Verilan keeps hiring new assistants. They're characters I play."

"I couldn't perform the show without her," Verilan confessed. "I'm the apprentice in this partnership. Almost all the seemings you witnessed tonight were hers."

"Wait," Joe said. "Skye. Are you Skye Ryland?"

She gave a little bow. "At your service."

Joe chuckled incredulously. “You’re a legend! One of the best illusionists in all of Elloweer. And one of the main leaders of the resistance.”

She gave a little wave. “Unseen. Inner circle. I wasn’t lying.”

Jace gestured at Verilan. “What do you really look like?”

“This is me,” Verilan said, spreading his hands and flashing a practiced smile.

Skye covered her mouth and whispered, “I helped him with the tan.”

“The tan is enhanced,” Verilan agreed. “And my real name is Alan. Not that it matters. I go by Verilan everywhere.”

Skye approached Mira and took one of her hands. “We’re in the same kind of trouble. I’m wanted. Not as badly as you, but I have plenty of enemies, including your father. This act is my camouflage. I’m a fugitive.”

“We don’t want to put you in greater danger,” Mira apologized.

“You misunderstand,” Skye said. “I want to share your danger. There won’t be any fee for my services. I don’t just want to help you with disguises. I want to help you find your sister.”

“What about the show?” Verilan asked, a little shaken.

“You could team up with Mandy,” Skye said. “Have her pose as your latest assistant. She could handle most of my illusions. Or you could take a break. We’ve made plenty of money. Our arrangement was never meant to be permanent.”

“You want to join us?” Joe asked Skye.

“I’ve never heard opportunity knock so loudly,” Skye said. “It isn’t every day I get the chance to strike a serious blow against the High King. Will you have me?”

Joe turned, deferring to Mira.

“Absolutely,” Mira said. “We plan to leave Carthage soon.”

Cole let out a breath. He had seen Skye’s seemings in action. It would be a huge advantage to have help from someone with her talents.

“Good,” Skye said. “Most of the people looking for you have no idea who you really are, but word is out about your presence here. I should age you. People are watching for a girl and three boys.”

“You should make Cole older as well,” Mira said.

“What’s your story?” Skye asked him.

“My slavemark got changed to a freemark,” Cole said, holding up his hand to display the mark. “But the slaver who captured me saw me and is after me.”

“Which slaver?”

“Ansel Pratt.”

Skye grimaced. “He’s a nasty one. But I can only adjust one of you tonight. A lasting seeming saps a lot of strength, and I’m already worn down after the show.”

“How do you keep your energy up?” Mira asked. “There were so many seemings tonight.”

“Prep work helps,” Skye said. “I enchant items to produce certain illusions, like the hoop, or the bracelet that turns Verilan into the announcer. Verilan assists with several of the seemings. Even after major preparations, the show still requires a great deal of effort and concentration. If I stretch beyond my limits, I could end up sick, dead, or insane, and anyone nearby could be injured as well. But I’m confident I can handle one of you tonight.”

“Change Mira tonight,” Cole said. “She’s in the most danger.”

“Okay,” Skye said. “We’ll meet up tomorrow and I’ll disguise Cole. How soon do you want to leave town?”

“I’d love to be on our way before nightfall tomorrow,” Joe said. “Day after that at the latest.”

“Then let’s take care of Mira and get you out of here,” Skye said. “Do you mind leaving me alone with her? Work like this goes better without distractions. You can wait right outside.”

Mira nodded, and Cole, Jace, Twitch, Joe, and Verilan left the dressing room. Verilan led them out to the stage. They sat on the edge in a row with their legs dangling.

“Think Skye could darken my tan?” Jace asked.

“She could make you look like anything,” Verilan said. “You’ve got plenty of color already. My natural skin tone is quite pale.”

“You’re part of the resistance too?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Verilan said. “I’m also a member of the Unseen, but Skye is more heavily involved.”

“Are you bummed to lose her?” Jace asked.

“What do you think?” Verilan said. “The woman has irreplaceable talent. Her capacity for seemings is nothing short of astonishing.”

“How are you in a fight?” Jace asked. “Maybe you could join us too.”

Verilan chuckled. “I’m no warrior. I’ll take some time off, work on a new show with a new partner. You’re lucky to have her help. She knows her way around Elloweer. Your chances of success just went way up.”

When Skye finally emerged, she was accompanied by a short, plump, middle-aged woman. A scarf bound the woman’s brown hair. She had a plain face and wore simple clothes.

“Is that you, Mira?” Cole asked.

“What do you think?” the woman asked, not sounding like Mira at all.

“Perfect,” Joe said. “Nothing about you stands out.”

Cole agreed. The woman wasn’t ugly or pretty, tall or short, heavy or thin. She looked very ordinary.

“Skye is a genius,” the woman said.

“I’m glad you’re pleased,” Skye said. “I’m wiped out. Joe, why don’t we meet tomorrow at Trellis Square? You know the place?”

“I’ll find it,” Joe said.

“Look for me around the third hour of the day,” Skye said. “Verilan will show you to a stage door. Did you come by coach?”

“We did,” Joe said.

“You should find it near the north curb,” Skye said. “The officials won’t let coaches linger out front without passengers present. Until tomorrow.”

Verilan guided them across the stage to the opposite wing from Skye’s dressing room and out a simple, unmarked door. Their coach waited not too far down the side street, near a couple of others. Streetlamps glared brightly enough to wash out most of the stars overhead. The side street didn’t have much pedestrian traffic, but Cole kept his head down, just in case. In less than a day, he would have a disguise that would render him invisible to his

enemies. It would be nice to walk in public without a constant fear of discovery.

In the coach, Joe asked Mira some trivia to ensure it was really her. Cole didn't blame him. Mira looked and sounded like a complete stranger.

After the coach dropped them off a few blocks from the inn, they made their way to their rooms without trouble. In bed, Cole relived the events of the day with gratitude. He knew where to find Dalton! He could still hardly believe it. How many days before he got to see his friend again? They also had a lead about Honor's location, and a guide to help them get there. As he drifted off to sleep, Cole wondered what Skye would make him look like in the morning.

## CHAPTER

# 11

## TAKEN

“**C**ole,” Twitch whispered urgently. “You hear that?”

The words reached Cole through an exhausted haze. Twitch and his bed were dim shapes in the darkness. Cole felt deliciously cozy inside the pocket of warmth between his covers. He wanted to ignore the question and sink back to sleep. Instead, he propped himself up on one elbow. “Huh?”

“Listen,” Twitch whispered quietly.

Twitch had never awakened him like this. What did he think he had heard? Was he being paranoid? Twitch was cautious, but not stupid.

A faint metallic scraping came from over by the door.

“That?” Cole asked, tensing up.

“Oh, no,” Twitch said, swinging his grasshopper legs out of his bed.

With a final click, the door burst open. A lantern backlit the stealthy figures racing into the room. Cole had barely sat up before rough hands seized him and squashed a coarse rag against his nose and mouth.

Struggling, Cole inhaled a chemical scent from the damp rag. The fumes burned inside his nostrils and throat, making him instantly woozy. Coughing and choking, Cole bucked and twisted as strong arms picked him up. One assailant pinned Cole’s arms to his torso while the other held his legs together.

The rag remained over his face. Having coughed out his air supply, Cole inhaled the piquant odor again. His senses receded. He thought he heard glass breaking. A gruff voice gave terse, unintelligible orders. They were carrying him. Or was he floating? He couldn't resist anymore. It was hard to move. He could feel his consciousness slipping away, and tried to fight it, but his mind was already too far adrift. Insensibility overcame him.



“Kid’s coming around,” a dry voice said.

“About time,” another voice answered.

Cole decided he should pretend to still be asleep. He was sitting up, tied to a chair, with a sharp ache behind the center of his forehead. He kept his head down and his eyes closed.

“Don’t play possum,” the first voice said. “I know you’re listening. Your breathing changed.”

Cole recognized the voice. Full of despair and dread, he opened his eyes.

Pushing his hat back a little, Ansel grinned. “Scarecrow! I just knew we’d meet again.”

They were in a squalid, bare room with old brick walls. Ansel and Ham sat in worn wooden chairs by a rickety table. They had apparently been playing cards. The room had no windows and a single sturdy wooden door. A pair of lanterns provided light, showing dark stains on the walls and floor, perhaps from flooding.

Cole found that he still had both of his hands. That was a relief. But Ansel was free to carry out his threat at any moment. Cole tried not to fixate on the sickle.

“Where are we?” Cole asked.

The grin disappeared. “I’ll ask the questions.”

Cole squirmed, testing his bindings. Thick ropes held him in a snug, scratchy embrace. His torso was lashed to the back of the chair, and his legs were bound to the wooden legs.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Ansel said. “Best to shake off any thoughts of freedom. That’s all in the past. You lasted longer than most runaways. You

still have your hand.”

“I noticed,” Cole said.

“The freemark on your wrist is remarkable. Looks completely authentic. No hint you ever bore a slavemark. Where’d you get it?”

Declan was in hiding far away. Telling the truth shouldn’t cause the Grand Shaper of Sambria any trouble. Cole swallowed. Maybe Ansel would show him some mercy if he was honest.

“I got it from Declan,” Cole said. “One of the Grand Shapers.”

This earned a wry chuckle from Ansel. “If you’re going to tell a whopper, might as well be a doozy.”

Cole gritted his teeth. Being honest wouldn’t help much if Ansel didn’t believe it. “Do you know a lot of other people who can turn a slavemark into a freemark without a trace?”

Ansel rubbed his chin, studying him. “Okay, Scarecrow, tell me how a runaway slave happened to meet the exiled Grand Shaper of Sambria.”

“I escaped Skyport in a skycraft,” Cole said. “Adam Jones knew about it. I flew into the Eastern Cloudwall and found Declan back there. He helped me. He’s not there anymore. The legionnaires chasing me flushed him out.”

Ham slammed a meaty hand down on the tabletop. “Enough! I’ll not hear another lie out of you. Come clean to the boss, or I’ll make you speak true.”

The outburst made Cole flinch and close his eyes. When he peeked, he saw Ansel holding out a staying hand to Ham. “Boy may not be lying.”

Ham’s eyes bulged with disbelief, but he made no reply.

“I’m not saying his tale sounds credible,” Ansel clarified. “I’m just saying it might be true. Go fetch Secha.”

Ham rose, crossed the room, and went out the door. Cole saw dim, grimy stairs through the doorway. Nothing else. Cole wondered if he would ever climb those stairs. The chances didn’t seem good. If he did, it would be as a one-handed slave. He had to stay calm. After the door closed, Ansel gave Cole a long stare.

“Who are you traveling with?” the slaver asked.

“Some other slaves from Skyport,” Cole said. “We escaped together. A man we met is helping us.”



Ansel nodded slowly. “A girl and two boys. And a member of the Unseen.”

Cole was surprised he knew so much.

“I’ve been asking about you,” Ansel said, responding to Cole’s expression. “Others are looking for a group that fled from Skyport. Easy math.”

“How’d you find me?” Cole asked.

“Don’t forget who’s asking the questions,” Ansel said. “People want the girl. Very important people. Who is she?”

“You don’t want to get mixed up with her,” Cole said.

Ansel’s face went blank. “I’ll be the judge of that. Who is she?”

“I don’t know,” Cole said.

Ansel stood up and grimly shook his head. “Now you’re lying.” He hefted his sickle, the cruel blade sinister in his grasp. Veins stood out on the back of his hand.

Cole stared in silence. Mira had trusted him with her secret. Ansel had kidnapped Cole from the same inn where she was staying—there could still be people watching the place, ready to snatch her on command. Cole couldn’t reveal her true value. “She’s a strong shaper.”

“That might be part of it,” Ansel said. “You don’t have to leave this room alive, Scarecrow.”

“I know.”

“Or in one piece,” Ansel added menacingly. “I’ve heard talk of a slave who ran away from the High King. A slave he desperately wants back.”

It was the story the legionnaires had given when they came for Mira at Skyport. It wasn’t true, but if Ansel thought she was a runaway slave, he might decide he was just the slaver to bring her in.

“She’s no slave,” Cole said.

“I expect she has a freemark,” Ansel said. “I’m sure it’s precisely as genuine as yours. The High King is my number one customer.”

The door opened and Secha entered, the swarthy woman who had given Cole his slavemark. Ham followed her in and closed the door.

The woman shuffled over to Cole. “The Grand Shaper undid my mark?”

“Yeah,” Cole said.

Secha bent over the mark, eyeing it closely. She rubbed it and sniffed it. She murmured soft words.

“What do you think?” Ansel asked.

“Could be the Grand Shaper’s work,” Secha said. “I have no better explanation. It’s as if my mark never happened. A transformation this perfect should not be possible.”

“Leave us,” Ansel said. “The boy and I have matters to discuss.”

Suddenly, the door burst open, and Joe entered, bow drawn. Jace stepped through the doorway behind him, golden rope in hand.

Cole’s heart surged—they had found him!

Ham charged them, and the rope lashed out, wrapped around his torso, and heaved him upward, snapping his neck sickeningly against the ceiling. His bulky body flopped to the floor.

“Stand down!” Joe yelled, an arrow ready to fly.

Ansel, his expression dark but guarded, slowly set down his sickle and raised his hands. “You heard the man, Secha,” he said.

Hands up, Secha sidled toward Ansel.

“That’s far enough,” Joe ordered. “On the floor, facedown, both of you.”

They obeyed without resistance.

Twitch and Mira entered behind Joe and Jace. Cole could hardly believe they were all here! When he woke up tied to the chair, he had known that at best he would lose a hand and end up a slave. At worst he would be tortured and killed. He hadn’t dared to imagine the possibility of a rescue.

Mira hurried to him and used her Jumping Sword to cut his bindings. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m okay,” Cole said, stunned that the statement was true. “I thought I was toast. How’d you find me?”

“Twitch,” Jace said. “He got away through the window when they came for you. He tailed them here, then came and got us. To make it easy, they brought you to West Carthage.” Jace wiggled his golden rope to emphasize his point.

Cole stood up, rubbing his arms where the ropes had limited his circulation. Now he understood why Mira no longer looked like a middle-

aged woman. No longer in Elloweer, her seeming had dissolved. Ansel glared up from the floor.

“Watch out for Ansel,” Cole said. “He’s dangerous. And he knows we’re the people everyone is looking for.”

“How much does he know?” Joe inquired.

“That we escaped from Skyport,” Cole said. “That you’re helping us. He heard that one of us is a slave who escaped from the High King.”

“You’re outlaws,” Ansel rasped. “I took Cole as a slave legally. He changed his mark.”

“You better pray we’re not outlaws,” Joe said. “This is about the time when outlaws would start killing witnesses.”

“We’re not going to kill him?” Jace asked.

Joe looked over at him. “Like this? After he surrendered?”

Jace shrugged. “Too easy?”

“He’ll hunt us,” Cole warned.

“I’m seldom at a disadvantage,” Ansel said. “Can’t claim to like it, but I also can’t do much to change it. Not while the boy has that rope and you have that bow.” He gave a disgusted sneer, then clenched his jaw. “Tell you what. If you let me and Secha go, we’ll return the favor. I won’t pursue any of you. Easy as that. This never happened.”

Secha looked at Ansel with stunned surprise.

Ansel noticed her expression. “What? You got a better idea?” His eyes returned to Joe. “Offer stands.”

“This could end badly if he’s lying,” Twitch pointed out.

Ansel gave an angry laugh. “Traders who lie don’t stay in business. I claimed Cole lawfully. Don’t fault me for tracking him down. It’s like guzzling vinegar, but I’ll concede that you got the best of me. I’m in no rush to die. It’s time to cut my losses and walk away. That’s my word on the matter. Secha?”

“Me too,” Secha said. “Let us live, and this is forgotten.”

“How’d you find me?” Cole asked.

“Does it matter?” Ansel asked.

“You’re not the one asking the questions anymore,” Cole said.

Ansel heaved a poisonous sigh. “Wasn’t magic. I drew an image of you. I have a hand for faces. We hired some artists to copy your portrait, and I rounded up some men to share the pictures around town, offering a reward. Somebody working the door at the dazzle show last night recognized you. Word got back to me in time to have men follow you after the performance. At first they thought they’d missed you, but then you exited late from a side door. Once we knew your inn and your room, the rest was easy.”

Joe crouched near Ansel. “You’re not a good man. Legal or not, your occupation is despicable. But you’re a trader, and I’ll take you at your word. If we leave you here, you’ll never hunt Cole again, and you won’t utter a word to the authorities about seeing the group they’re looking for.”

“That’s my pledge,” Ansel said. “I’ll go on living my life, and you’ll carry on with yours. A profitable bargain for both parties. End of story.”

“Killing him would be safer,” Jace said. “We took out his guys. He might change his mind.”

“He’ll keep his word,” Joe said.

“You’ll all get caught,” Ansel said. “You’ve drawn too much attention. It’s just a matter of time. But it’ll have nothing to do with me or mine. You took out Ham, probably some of my other people on your way down here. That’s to be expected. Heat of combat, you or them. Water under the bridge at this point. Sunk costs. You don’t want to kill me in cold blood. I don’t want to die for doing my job. I’m giving you an out. Let’s all go on living.”

“He’s good,” Jace said.

Ansel spat sideways. “I like straight talk.”

Joe looked to Mira, and she looked to Cole. He considered Ansel, sprawled on the grimy floor. The trader had abducted his friends. If not for Ansel, Cole would be at home right now, going to school or playing video games or horsing around outside. Jenna and Dalton would be safe, as would the others.

But if slavery was legal, did Ansel have a point? Was he just doing his job? He was a bad guy, but he hadn’t killed any of the kids. If he promised not to chase them anymore, Cole couldn’t stand by and let him be *murdered*, even after the awful things the slaver had done.

Cole gave a nod. "I believe him."

Mira nodded as well.

"All right," Joe said. "We'll take you at your word. I don't want to see you again."

"The feeling is mutual," Ansel assured him. "Let's become strangers. Leave us here and make your way wherever you choose. We'll stay down here for an hour, and we won't pursue you. Reasonable?"

Joe gave a quick salute. "See you never."

## CHAPTER

# 12

## CARAVAN

**I** booked us passage with a caravan that leaves tomorrow at dawn,” Skye said. “It was the soonest I could manage.”

They sat in a rented room not far from Trellis Square, where they had met Skye without trouble. The rescue had taken place in the first hour of the morning, leaving them plenty of time to make the scheduled rendezvous.

“Is a caravan the best way for us to travel?” Joe asked.

“We’ll draw much less attention than we would on our own,” Skye said. “The back roads of Elloweer are unsafe. Most people live near a castle or in towns behind walls for good reason. Strange creatures roam this kingdom. People are wary of outsiders. Considering the threat of the Rogue Knight, I vote for a caravan.”

“Isn’t the Rogue Knight fighting against the government?” Cole asked. “Doesn’t that put him on our side?”

“I wish,” Skye said. “From what I hear, the Rogue Knight hasn’t shown much interest in who he robs, as long as they have money. He hasn’t provided leadership to the cities he has conquered. He hasn’t sided with a cause. His only clear aim is to defeat champions and give away the spoils. His methods are reckless. He seems to want anarchy.”

“Anarchy would shake up the High King,” Jace said.

“Chaos in Junction City might help us,” Skye replied. “But wars are only decided by champions in Elloweer, so the Rogue Knight only shakes up Ellowine towns. Think about what no taxes really means—no guardsmen, no community maintenance, no public services. The High King and his governors are better than complete disorder.”

“A lady I spoke with thought the Rogue Knight might be the Duke of Laramy,” Cole said.

Skye rolled her eyes. “Everybody has a theory. I have it on good authority that the Duke of Laramy is dead. He was the nephew of Callista, our Grand Shaper. He remained vocal against the High King’s takeover after Callista went into hiding. We tried to recruit him into the Unseen, but he preferred to make his outrage public. He vanished before long. Drowned, as I understand it.”

“What about Callista?” Mira asked. “Do we know how to find her? She would probably help us.”

Skye chuckled skeptically. “Believe me, the Unseen have looked. Nobody can work changings and illusions like Callista. She could be a great asset. But if she wants to hide, we don’t have a chance. Finding her would take a miracle.”

“We have a Miracle,” Jace inserted.

“Aren’t there any clues?” Mira asked, ignoring the comment. “Maybe a way to signal Callista to come out of hiding?”

Skye shook her head. “Callista abandoned her stronghold decades ago. She brought none of her apprentices or attendants with her and left no messages with her fellow enchanters. She just vanished. Even if we found her, who knows what we could expect? Callista was always eccentric.”

“You’ve already signed on with this caravan?” Joe asked.

“Yes,” Skye said. “We’ll have two coaches, each with four horses and a driver. As travel goes, it should be very comfortable. I’ll use my Madeline disguise—the disgruntled assistant looking to start over in a new town. You can pose as my attendants. The caravan I chose is led by Monroe Sinclair, a longtime sympathizer of the rebellion. We can always pull out. I’ll lose my

deposit, but I have ringers to spare. Travel by caravan is a bit slower and more structured than a small mounted group, but I think it's safer overall."

"You're the local," Mira said. "And you've spent a lot of time dodging the Ellowine authorities. We'll trust your judgment."

"Makes sense to me," Joe agreed.

"Very well," Skye said. "I have other preparations to make. Mira, come to my room in an hour, and I'll restore your illusion. I'll make a new identity for Cole tonight. We rented rooms here for three days, but plan to leave with the caravan tomorrow at sunrise."

After Skye left the room, Cole neared Twitch. He didn't know the right words to sum up his gratitude, but he had to try. "Thanks for following me. I thought I was a goner. I don't know what I would have done."

"You would have been an extremely right-handed slave," Jace said. "Thank Mira too. She insisted we go after you."

Mira swatted Jace on the shoulder. "You would have gone on your own."

Jace shrugged. "Maybe. We'll never know."

Cole was too grateful to let Jace get to him. "Thank you all," he said. "I'll owe you forever."

"With Ansel off his trail, does Cole still need a disguise?" Jace asked.

"Better safe than sorry," Joe said. "I expect Ansel will keep his word, but it doesn't hurt to take precautions. Besides, the word is out to look for three boys and a girl. Having one of the boys look older will make us all harder to detect."

"I agree," Mira said.

"Since Twitch just bailed me out," Cole said, "I need to tell you something before I forget. Twitch could use our help with a problem."

Twitch's eyes widened in panic. He shook his head hurriedly.

"I'm worried you'll never ask on your own," Cole said.

Twitch covered his eyes. "All right. Go ahead."

"Help with what?" Mira asked.

Cole explained about the swamp dweller who had taken over Twitch's hometown. Twitch filled in names and details when Cole needed help. Even Jace listened respectfully.



“I’m sure we can find a mercenary to help you out,” Joe said. “I’d fight Renford myself, but I’m not really a duel-with-a-sword kind of guy. I’m afraid I’d lose. I can brawl, but I tend to rely on gadgets, and surprise, and a quick getaway.”

Twitch waved his hands to deny the offer. “I don’t want to cause any of you extra trouble. You already have more than enough problems. But I could use help hiring the right fighter.”

“Twitch!” Mira scolded. “Of course we’ll help you!”

“Can it wait until we get to Merriston?” Joe asked.

“It can be later than that,” Twitch said. “I want to help Mira find Honor first—and help Cole find Dalton.”

Joe crossed to Twitch and shook his hand. “It’s a deal. For now, rest up. We start early tomorrow.”



The caravan stood ready to depart well before sunrise. Two dozen wagons and coaches waited in the clammy predawn chill for the East Gate to open. Several riders would accompany the horse-drawn vehicles, including Monroe Sinclair and five private soldiers in light armor.

A thickset man in his fifties, Monroe had short graying hair and a long leather cloak slit partway up the back. He wore a large sword at his hip in a black scabbard. His broad jaw and blunt features made Cole think of old pioneer photographs. He seemed comfortable with leadership as he rode up and down the wagon line giving quiet instructions.

Seated in one of the eight passenger coaches, Cole bundled a thin blanket tighter around his shoulders against the chill. He studied his hands. They looked normal, although a long examination in front of a mirror had confirmed that others would see him as a short, plain man with an uneven haircut.

Skye had created the seeming last night as Cole squatted on a low stool. The procedure had mostly involved her pacing around him while he held still, occasionally raising an arm or turning his head as directed. Sometimes she moved in close and shut one eye. Other times she considered him from across

the room. He hadn't sensed anything out of the ordinary besides a faint tingling once or twice. When he presented himself to the others, Jace had laughed and said, "I thought you were ugly before." Cole hoped it meant the disguise would work.

The approaching dawn infused some color into the somber morning. Jace, Twitch, and Joe all sat with Cole. They were dressed as servants. Mira rode in the fancier coach with Skye.

Several horsemen came trotting toward the caravan near Cole's coach. At their front rode a man in full armor, his face hidden behind helm and visor. The others were dressed as guardsmen. Behind them rolled a stately coach with two uniformed drivers. Monroe rode over to greet the newcomers.

Cole watched with interest. Surely the guardsmen hadn't come looking for Mira, but his mouth was dry nonetheless. Joe watched intently as well.

"Can I help you?" Monroe asked.

"Good morning, Monroe," the heavily armored man said. "We're joining your caravan."

"It's the first I've heard about it," Monroe said, clearly rankled.

"Orders from the alderman," the man replied. "We're escorting his daughter Lucinda to Merriston. Alderman Cronin thought we'd travel more comfortably with your caravan, but he didn't want word of the journey to spread ahead of time. You'll still get your full fee, and you'll have twice the armed escorts, including the best knight in Carthage."

Not wanting to appear too interested, Cole shifted his eyes away from the conversation. Having a knight and city guardsmen along would increase their risk of discovery. He listened nervously, hoping that Monroe might deny the request.

"I don't like surprises," Monroe said. "Cronin should have told me. I can keep a secret."

"I'm just following orders," the knight replied. "You better do the same."

"The alderman's authority extends to the walls of Carthage," Monroe said. "Not beyond."

"His official jurisdiction ends at the wall," the knight agreed. "But he controls who goes in and out of that gate."

“I’m aware.” Monroe sighed. “I don’t want needless trouble. I’ve no intention of locking horns with Cronin. I just don’t like getting pushed around.”

“I’ll take that as consent to join you?” the knight verified.

“A larger armed escort makes everyone safer,” Monroe said. “But this remains my caravan.”

“All coaches except for one, and all personnel but mine,” the knight said. “We’d prefer to ride near the middle.”

“Fall in wherever you wish,” Monroe grumbled.

Cole glanced at Joe, who gave a little shrug, as if the presence of the guards might not be all bad. Cole supposed it could prevent other guardsmen or legionnaires from giving the wagon train much scrutiny. With Skye, Mira, and himself disguised by seemings, the chances were decent that the knight and his soldiers wouldn’t catch on that they were on the run.

“Thank you,” the knight said to Monroe. “Shall we get under way?” Turning toward the wall, he signaled with an upraised hand. A moment later the gate began to open.

Before long, the wagons started rolling. Cole settled back in his seat. They were on their way to Merriston—and to Dalton!

## CHAPTER

# — 13 —

## **DISTURBING TIDINGS**

**B**y the third day, Cole had fallen into the routine of traveling with the caravan. In his role as the plain-faced servant, he could move up and down the line when they made camp at night or paused to eat. While performing errands real or pretended, he kept his eyes and ears open. As long as he had some firewood in his hands or a bucket of water to lug, most people acted like he was invisible.

He spent most of his time riding in the coach with Jace, Twitch, and Joe. Besides fetching firewood and water, his only chores involved bringing Lady Madeline her meals and helping her in and out of her coach. He had plenty of time to daydream about how surprised Dalton would be to see him.

The wagons contained items going to Merriston for trade. A couple of the merchants rode in coaches to accompany multiple wagonloads. The less prosperous merchants drove their own wagons. The other passenger coaches belonged to people returning to Merriston, moving to Merriston, or traveling for business purposes. As far as Cole could tell, only Lucinda was visiting as a tourist.

Konley, the knight accompanying Lucinda, seemed to consider himself above any work besides riding around in armor. At night he removed his iron shell and slept in a tent while his men stood guard. Cole had gathered

firewood with Mory, his squire. A couple of years older than Cole, the boy acted like the president of Konley's fan club. Apparently, the knight was very skilled in combat and a favorite of Henrick Stroop, champion of Carthage.

Cole seldom saw Lucinda. She was a moderately pretty girl in her late teens. Her dark hair had lots of curls, and Cole thought she wore too much makeup. She spent most of her time in her coach. Whenever Cole saw her, she was wearing a dress and a fancy hat.

After lunch on the third day, while Cole helped Skye into her coach, she invited him to join her and Mira for the afternoon. Cole happily agreed. The seats in their coach had better cushions, and Cole hoped the change in company would help the miles pass more quickly. Since he was busy portraying a servant whenever they were together, Cole hadn't really gotten to speak with Skye or Mira since leaving Carthage.

"Comfortable?" Skye asked as the coach started rolling.

"Yes, Lady Madeline," Cole responded reflexively.

Skye laughed. "You can drop the act in here. I created a seeming to scramble all sound leaving this compartment. Even without any enchanting, I don't think the driver could hear us over the noise of the road."

"Sorry," Cole said. "It's automatic."

"That's probably a good thing," Skye said.

Cole turned to Mira, who he was now used to seeing as a middle-aged woman. "How are you doing?"

"Being Gayline is easy," Mira said. "People hardly notice Lady Madeline's servant."

"Me too!" Cole enthused. "It's a great way to pick up gossip."

"Have you heard anything useful?" Skye wondered.

"Nothing amazing," Cole said. "You guys?"

"Some of Konley's guardsmen knew me from the dazzle show," Skye said. "I flirted a bit, and one of them confessed that part of their mission involves the Rogue Knight. Henrick wants to learn more about him. If Konley gets the chance, he's supposed to kill him."

"Can Konley do it?" Cole asked.

"The man can fight," Skye said.

“His squire thinks he can outwrestle a bear while walking on water,” Cole said.

Skye grinned. “Konley places very well in the Carthage tournaments. Only a couple of our other knights can really challenge him. He’s the former champion of the town of Rudberg. Some thought he would challenge Henrick, but then he forfeited Rudberg to accept a position as one of his knights.”

“Do you think we’ll be robbed by the Rogue Knight?” Mira asked.

“I almost hope so,” Skye said. “Part of me feels the same as Henrick. I’d like to see him up close, learn more about him. He has no history of harming those he robs. I hid our cash in secret compartments and am carrying most of my wealth in the form of banknotes that only I can redeem.”

“I don’t know,” Mira said. “I’d rather steer clear of trouble with the Rogue Knight. Who knows what he might do? He’s too much of a wild card.”

“He’s the biggest wild card in Elloweer,” Skye said. “And most of what I know about him is hearsay.”

Cole definitely sided with Mira on that topic. He didn’t want to cross paths with a man who had killed lots of champions and liked to rob innocent travelers. Because that was all they needed—more danger to face!

Cole listened to the clomping of the horses pulling the coach, and he thought about what they hoped to accomplish in Merriston.

“What’s Honor like?” Cole wondered aloud.

Mira smiled. “Nori is the second oldest of my sisters, and the most independent. In Junction, noblewomen wear their hair long, but Nori kept hers short. She was always outside—riding, climbing, hunting, sparring. Nori has a passion for swordplay and is good with a bow as well. She trained with my father’s elite guards, and by her early teens could defeat many of them in duels.”

“Really?” Cole asked.

Mira shrugged. “Maybe they went a little easy on her. Who knows?” Mira’s eyes had a faraway look in them. “Nori was fifteen when father froze our ages. My sister Elegance is tall, and Nori was almost her height, but with a

stronger build. She can be hard to get along with, especially if she argues against you. Nori always thinks she is right. But it was fun to see her stand up to father. She challenged him more than the rest of us combined.”

“I think I’d like this girl,” Skye said.

“Probably,” Mira agreed. “Honor is a very loyal friend. She gives great advice and can come up with all sorts of games. She’s a good listener and will always keep your secrets. I love her so much. It kills me to think of her in prison. She belongs outdoors. I wonder who could have caught her? Nori is the last of my sisters I’d expect to need a rescue.”

“She seems adventurous,” Cole said. “Maybe she took too many risks.”

“Could be,” Mira said. “She is never afraid of a challenge—or to speak up when something seems wrong to her.”

“Sounds like she lived up to her name,” Skye said.

Mira got a funny look on her face. “We all did, in one way or another. I used to talk about it with Costa.”

“Constance?” Skye checked.

“Right. Costa thought our names helped inspire our personalities. I think it was Mother using her sight. She had a way of knowing things. Elegance was the most graceful and feminine. Honor was truest to herself in her words and actions. Constance was the most levelheaded and reliable. And little Destiny would randomly surprise us with insights that seemed way beyond her years.”

“If I catch on fire,” Cole said, “I burn for a long time.”

Mira laughed lightly. “I guess your mom had insights as well.”

“What about you?” Cole asked.

Mira’s cheeks reddened. “I have weird accidents, but so far I’ve survived them.”

“Like what?” Cole asked.

“Besides getting trapped on a sky castle with a homicidal Cyclops? Or getting sucked into a terminal void? Or crashing down into a ravine while inside an autocoach?”

“Yeah,” Cole said with a laugh. “Besides the stuff I know about.”

“Both my mother and I barely survived my birth. I came prematurely. Mother only had Destiny because father insisted they try once more for a

son.”

“What else?” Cole prodded, curious.

Mira sighed in resignation. “I toppled out of a window when I was five and fell three stories into a handcart full of hay. I mistakenly ate poisonous berries but puked them up before I died. A dog once saved me from drowning. At age three I wandered into the street as a wagon was coming. I tripped, and the wagon passed right over me. The hooves and the wheels barely missed me. Those are the big ones.”

“Crazy,” Cole said.

“Let’s hope the miracles keep coming,” Mira said, raising her crossed fingers.

“Let’s hope they’re contagious,” Skye muttered.

Cole watched the countryside go by out his window. They passed through small hamlets. A gray stone tower stood atop a low hill, its windows dark and mysterious. Fields and forests came and went. They rumbled across an old wooden bridge.

Late in the afternoon, the wagons eased to a halt. The sun was still too high for them to be making camp, unless they were stopping quite a bit earlier than they had on previous days. Maybe some obstacle was blocking the road?

A knock came at the door of their coach. Skye opened it to reveal Monroe standing beside a stranger.

“This man claims to have a message for you,” Monroe said.

“An urgent message,” the man reported. “From Verilan.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “How’d he track me down?”

The messenger shrugged. “I was told I would find you here.”

“Tell him I’m not coming back.”

The man shook his head and held up a rolled paper sealed with red wax. “I don’t know the man. I have no idea what he’s asking.”

Skye snatched the paper from the messenger. “I can guess. I used to think we had something. It’s over between us. If he wanted me in his life, he should have treated me better when he had me.”

The messenger held up his hands defensively. “I have no opinions regarding these matters. I was paid to deliver a message.”



Skye waved him away. “You slowed a caravan for no reason.”

“I rode hard for two days,” the messenger explained.

Skye produced a silver ringer. “Thank you for discharging your duty. I’m sure you’re a marvelous person.” She looked at Monroe. “We can get moving.”

“Are you sure?” the leader of the caravan asked.

“Positive,” Skye said, closing her door.

A few moments later the coach rolled forward again. Skye broke the seal and unrolled the paper. Her eyes scanned the text. “It’s a plea for me to return. Verilan didn’t write it, but an attempt was made to match his hand.”

“Who wrote it?” Cole asked.

Skye waved a hand over the parchment. Cole saw glowing words appear in different penmanship, but the angle of his view kept him from reading the message. Skye gasped.

“What?” Mira asked.

Skye scanned to the bottom of the secret message before responding. “The false message from Verilan was there in case the wrong eyes read it. The real message comes from another member of the Unseen, a trusted friend. Verilan went missing two days ago. His apartment showed no sign of a struggle, but his secret distress mark was found on the wall. It means foul play. And it could spell trouble for us.”

“If somebody found *him* . . .,” Mira began.

“They could be close to finding us,” Skye finished. “Even if Verilan doesn’t break, they might come looking for me next.”

“Which would lead them to our caravan,” Cole realized. That was just what they needed—a squad of Enforcers on their trail while they crawled forward in a wagon train. They would be easy prey!

“Not immediately,” Skye said. “I paid Monroe extra to register under a false name. I told him I didn’t want Verilan to know where I’d gone. There is no paperwork tying Madeline to this caravan. Only a couple trusted members of the Unseen knew my plans.”

“What if Verilan spills his guts?” Cole asked.

“He knew I was leaving town,” Skye said. “I didn’t specify how, and I did my best to muddy his idea of where I was going. I always try to cover my tracks. Still, in spite of the fudged paperwork, everyone in this caravan knows me as Madeline. Witnesses could have recognized me leaving. It’s possible we’ll be found.”

“The messenger found you,” Cole pointed out.

“The messenger had help from the Unseen,” Skye said. “They would have used somebody sympathetic to our cause.”

“Doesn’t mean he’ll withstand torture,” Mira said.

Skye nodded. “It should take him a couple of days to get back to Carthage.”

“Is this why people shoot the messenger?” Cole asked.

“Sometimes,” Skye said. “It would take some very impressive investigating for anyone to connect the messenger to us.”

“Doesn’t this Hunter guy have a pretty scary reputation?” Cole asked.

“The Hunter is one of the best,” Skye said, sighing venomously. “We definitely don’t want to tangle with him. I hope he’s not who took Verilan.”

“Do we take off on our own?” Cole wondered.

Skye furrowed her brow. “That would look very suspicious to Monroe, Konley, and the others. It would introduce many new dangers. I’ll talk it over with Joe when we stop.”

“What do we do for now?” Cole asked, suddenly feeling confined by the coach.

Skye patted Mira’s shoulder. “Hope for those miracles.”

## CHAPTER

# 14

## THE ROGUE KNIGHT

**A**fter a lengthy discussion, Joe and Skye decided to take their chances with the caravan rather than make a scene by leaving. Mira approved the verdict, and so the journey continued much as it had started, but with an increase of backward glances.

Cole spent a lot of time watching the empty road behind the caravan. He wasn't sure if he would see legionnaires, or city guardsmen, or Enforcers on strange mounts, but he didn't want enemies to sneak up on the caravan unnoticed.

As Cole's group directed their attention to the rear, day by day, Konley and his men became more alert about the road ahead. Seven nights into their journey, while gathering firewood, Cole noticed Konley addressing his men. Keeping his eyes averted, Cole moved within earshot of their campfire.

"These next two days will be the most vital," Konley said, pounding a fist into his palm for emphasis. "The robberies have all happened close to Merriston, so we'll either meet the Rogue Knight tonight, tomorrow, or the day after. After that we'll be in the capital. I want no less than three men on patrol at all hours."

"Think he'll show?" one of the guardsmen asked.

“Honestly?” Konley said, rocking back on his heels. “I expect he’ll see not just Monroe with his five mercenaries, but also a knight and seven uniformed guardsmen, and he’ll hang back to await easier prey. But if the scoundrel makes an appearance, I want to be ready.”

Cole moved out of hearing as Konley began making specific assignments for the guardsmen. If they were two days out from Merriston, that meant he and his friends were two days from a clean getaway. Once they left the caravan, their trail would become much colder for anyone in pursuit.



The next morning, less than an hour after the caravan started rolling, ten riders cantered down the road toward them, all wearing suits of armor. While four riders stayed on the road to force the wagon train to stop, the other six trotted into the field beside the road and came about to address the travelers. One of the knights was the size of a child and rode a sturdy pony rather than a horse. The rest were imposing forms on powerful steeds. Even the mounts wore armor.

The knight at the front was the biggest of the group and rode an enormous horse. His elaborate armor gleamed in the sunlight. A sheathed broadsword was strapped across his back. A pair of antlers sprouted from his polished helmet.

Cole’s stomach twisted into knots. No way could their luck be this bad with everything else they had to deal with. But this had to be him—the man everyone had been so afraid they’d meet on the road to Merriston.

The Rogue Knight.

“That’s him, isn’t it?” Cole asked, fear shooting through him. “That’s the Rogue Knight.”

“Has to be,” Jace said, a slight tremor in his voice. “What other bandits are going to ambush a caravan wearing full armor?”

Cole got chills just looking at the group. “How can they move weighed down by all that metal? They look bulletproof. Not an inch of skin is showing.”

“They must be strong,” Twitch said. “The horses too.”

“Why antlers?” Cole asked.

“A guy like that can wear whatever he wants,” Jace replied.

Along the front half of the caravan, Monroe and his mercenaries lined up on their horses, blocking access to the wagons. Konley and his five mounted guardsmen took up positions between the knights and Lucinda’s stately coach, with two more driving her vehicle.

“Greetings, good travelers,” the knight called out in a booming voice, somewhat muffled by his helmet.

“Why have you halted my caravan?” Monroe asked.

“A fair question,” the knight replied. “I am the champion known across the land as the Rogue Knight.”

Even though the confirmation was no surprise to Cole, he still felt a jolt hearing the words aloud. Champions of mighty cities were plotting against this man. People for miles around spoke about him in fear, and now here he was, roughly a hundred feet away.

“According to the established order,” the Rogue Knight continued, “I have issued a challenge to Rustin Sage, champion of Merriston, which the coward refuses to acknowledge. To pressure the craven into doing his duty, I am relieving those who travel to and from Merriston of their riches. On the day that Rustin faces me as prescribed by law, all the goods will be returned.”

“You mean to rob us?” Monroe verified.

“Correct. I am taking the valuables that Rustin should protect. I will not spend a copper ringer of the spoils. All will be returned with interest after the duel.”

“This is going to get ugly,” Twitch murmured.

“And we have front row seats,” Jace said.

“What if we’re not just the audience?” Cole asked, his insides tense. What could they do if violence came their way? Their Jumping Swords wouldn’t work here. Neither would the golden rope.

“Check out the tiny knight,” Jace said. “If a fight breaks out, I call him.”

The joke didn’t do much to relax Cole—the thought of an actual fight here was terrifying.

“I have a wagonload of furs and specialty items,” a merchant called, his voice breaking a little. “They represent most of my wealth. Taking them would ruin me.”

“Bring your grievance to Rustin Sage,” the Rogue Knight replied. “Your wagons are mine for now. The drivers must remain to help me transport them, then they will be released with the horses. The passenger coaches and other horses may remain to bear you to your destinations. Each individual will be allowed to retain any money equal to or less than two silver ringers. I don’t want to leave you destitute. I won’t take your clothes or shoes, unless the attire is merchandise heading to market. But I’ll keep the rest—ringaroles, jewelry, promissory notes, deeds, and the like.”

“And if we won’t hand it over?” Monroe asked firmly.

“Do not mistake my courtesy for weakness,” the Rogue Knight said. “I do not wish to harm anyone, but any who choose to resist me will die swiftly.”

“The worst of their armor is much better than Konley’s,” Jace muttered beside Cole. “And those horses are incredible.”

Monroe glanced at his soldiers. “All right, boys. Time to earn your wages.”

Four of the five private soldiers spurred their horses forward. One dismounted and produced a longbow.

Konley pointed to three of his guardsmen and gestured toward the fight. They charged forward with the mercenaries.

The Rogue Knight drew his sword. One of his companions hefted a flanged mace, another held up a battle-ax, a third clutched a spear, and a fourth revealed a chain with a spiked ball at the end. The small knight drew a little sword.

Cole winced as the knights rode forward to meet the attack of the mercenaries and the guardsmen. A tumult of devastating impacts filled the air. The knight with the spear shattered a wooden shield, and a mercenary flipped backward off his horse to tumble ruinously. The knight with the flanged mace clubbed a guardsman with a blow to the chest that folded him grotesquely. Swords clashed, bones crunched, hooves thundered, blood splashed, men yelled, and horses screamed. Clods of dirt spewed into the air.

Within moments, only the six knights remained on horseback. An arrow sparked against the Rogue Knight's breastplate, bouncing away harmlessly. The Rogue Knight nodded toward the mercenary with the longbow, and the tiny knight raced off in that direction.

At the approach of the small knight, the mercenary tossed aside his bow and drew a sword. When the undersized knight drew near, the little guy sprang from his pony at full gallop, skewered the bowman as they collided, then landed in a clangorous roll.

"You still want to fight the little guy?" Cole asked Jace.

Of the four mercenaries and three guardsmen on the ground, two of the private soldiers got up, panting, bleeding, but with weapons in hand. The Rogue Knight nodded to the knight with the battle-ax, who dismounted and approached the two mercenaries with the implacable confidence of the grim reaper. Cole didn't want to look but couldn't resist.

One of the mercenaries leaped forward and swung his sword. The knight caught the blade in his mailed hand and cut him down with a vicious swipe. The other mercenary backed away, his sword falling from trembling hands.

"Kneel and surrender," the ax-wielding knight demanded in deep tones.

The man gave a wretched glance at Monroe and then dropped to his knees.

"Is this the end of your resistance?" the Rogue Knight inquired loudly.

Monroe looked down the line of wagons to Konley. "What say you, sir knight?"

Raising his visor, Konley cleared his throat. "I challenge you, Rogue Knight, to single combat."

The offer surprised Cole. Based on everything he had seen, he doubted Konley had much chance against the antlered knight.

"Who are you to challenge me?" the Rogue Knight responded.

"I am Konley, second knight to Henrick Stroop, champion of Carthage."

"Where is Henrick?" the Rogue Knight asked. "His challenge I would heed. 'Rogue Knight' may be my title, but I am the champion of nine fair towns and three noble cities. It is not within your rights to challenge me, but

any of my eight and a half knights would gladly engage you should you so desire.”

“Eight and a half?” Konley repeated.

“Eight full-size knights, and Minimus, the Halfknight, who just slew the archer.”

The small knight was back on his feet. “Let me have him, sire,” the little knight begged, his tinny voice in a fairly high register.

“I’m not going to grapple with underlings,” Konley said. “In the eyes of the realm you are an outlaw harassing travelers. Your thievery has forfeited any protections a true champion would enjoy. Perhaps you fear to face me.”

Cole shared a glance with Jace. *He’s so dead*, Jace mouthed.

“I know of you, Konley,” the Rogue Knight said. “I have made a study of all the champions and their knights. You were once champion of Rudberg.”

“That’s right,” Konley said.

“You gained that position when the former champion stepped down,” the Rogue Knight continued.

“I was his first knight,” Konley said.

“You inherited your championship,” the Rogue Knight said. “Why are you not still champion of Rudberg?”

“Henrick offered me a place among his knights,” Konley said. “I stepped down.”

“Why surrender your championship to serve another?” the Rogue Knight asked, walking his horse toward him.

“Rudberg is a minor town,” Konley said. “Knighthood under Henrick was a better position.”

“It was a matter of wanting a better position?” the Rogue Knight asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why not take the championship from Henrick? Would that not have been nobler?”

“The risk seemed unnecessary.”

The Rogue Knight was drawing near to him. “You confuse me, Konley. Shouldn’t a champion feel ashamed to forgo his position for reasons other than



retirement? Did you feel any reservations about abandoning a championship you did not win through combat in order to serve another?"

Konley's face was rigid. "Some, I suppose. But it was a generous offer."

"And the risk was less than facing Henrick."

"Yes."

The Rogue Knight reined his horse to a stop a few steps from Konley. "Do you know how I won my championships, Konley?"

"I've heard some stories."

The Rogue Knight held up his sword. "First, I intimidated the champion of a small town into vacating his office and naming me his successor. It was the one championship I claimed without violence. Since that day, eleven champions have died on my sword, including Gart the Headsman and Tirus of Wenley. I initiated all of those duels, and the best of my opponents failed to provide much of a contest. So first I will ask on what grounds you presume to call me afraid, and second I will ask why you would wish to fight me at all?"

"I was trying to goad you," Konley said, his voice not quite steady.

"That leaves the second question. You serve Henrick. Tirus of Wenley was a much better fighter than him. Gart the Headsman was his superior by an even greater margin. If the risk of fighting Henrick was too great, why provoke me?"

Konley looked pale. "I'm here under orders. I have my honor."

"You have dueled for sport," the Rogue Knight said. "Have you ever killed a man in combat?"

"No," Konley replied softly.

"What were your exact orders?" the Rogue Knight asked.

Konley hesitated for a moment. "I was commanded to observe the threat you pose. If I had the chance, I was to slay you."

"You have no chance," the Rogue Knight said bluntly. "You are outclassed. That reality releases you from the obligation. You needn't die today."

"I've already made my challenge," Konley said.

The Rogue Knight sheathed his sword. "You have no right to challenge me. But I am a sporting man. If you truly wish it, I will fight you to the death."

No quarter will be asked for, and none given. Or you can select one of your men to face me in single combat, so you can observe the threat I pose and report back. Or I could forget your challenge, and you could surrender. The choice is now yours.”

“No way he goes through with it,” Jace murmured. “He’s wetting his armor.”

“I wouldn’t do it,” Cole whispered back. “If he loses, will they be harsher to the rest of us?”

“That would be about my luck,” Jace complained.

Konley stared at the Rogue Knight, a sheen of perspiration glimmering on his face. He licked his lips and swallowed. Glancing sideways, he forced a small chuckle. “Danforth. You’re always saying you want the chance to show you deserve a promotion.”

A guardsman’s eyes widened. “Begging your pardon, Konley, I didn’t mean like this!”

Konley forced another chuckle. “Now’s the chance to step up and prove your worth.”

“None of us are a match for him, Konley,” Danforth said. “You saw what happened to the men who attacked them. We’ve had our example already. If you’re open to counsel, I’m all for surrendering.”

Konley looked around. “Any volunteers?”

The guardsmen remained conspicuously still.

Konley closed his visor. “What kind of knight would I be if I quailed?”

“A prudent one,” the Rogue Knight replied. “I do not relish taking life. I understand duty, but if you are not under direct orders to attack me, why perish? Don’t die because you’re embarrassed to not fight me. You’ve lived your life avoiding real combat. You’ve evaded risk. Why choose death today?”

Konley opened his visor. “You will harm none of us?”

“Not if you all do as I have asked.”

Konley glanced over his shoulder at Lucinda’s coach.

“You have people under your protection,” the Rogue Knight said. “Surrender and relinquish your valuables, and those in your care will not be

harm, you have my word. I will take your sword and your armor. Your men will relinquish their arms as well. You endanger the occupants of that coach more if you resist. Accidents happen during combat.”

“Very well,” Konley said. “We surrender.”

## CHAPTER

# 15

## VERITY

**T**he Rogue Knight checked with Monroe, who also agreed to surrender, then rode back out into the field to address the entire caravan. “Your leaders have submitted to my terms,” he announced. “Exit your coaches in an orderly manner. Any who attempt to escape will be run down. Don’t try to hide any valuables. We know all the tricks. It’s not fair that some don’t lose their goods because they could afford hidden compartments or hollow boot heels. I don’t care if I can’t use your promissory notes—I want them. My purpose is not to spend your money. Complain to your cowering champion until he does his duty. His unlawful behavior gave rise to mine.”

Cole looked to Joe. “What do we do?”

Joe considered the boys thoughtfully. “I’ve never seen a guy like this Rogue Knight. He has it all—the brains, the skill, the right men, the right equipment. I think we follow his orders and be grateful if we leave with our lives.”

“Come,” the Rogue Knight encouraged. “Bring your valuables and exit your coaches. Nobody will be harmed. Line up on my side of the caravan. I mean everyone—women, children, servants, teamsters, wealthy merchants, government officials.”

“What about the money?” Cole whispered.

“Our secret compartments are covered by illusions,” Joe whispered back. “Let’s leave it alone and see how it goes.”

Cole climbed out of the coach. Mira and Skye emerged from the coach in front of them. Mira looked distraught, but she tried to smile when she saw Cole.

“This includes the occupants of the fancy coach Konley was guarding,” the Rogue Knight said. “Don’t make us drag you out of there.”

A short distance down the line from Cole, the door to the stately coach opened. Lucinda emerged, along with a matronly servant. Both women wore dresses. Lucinda sported a wide-brimmed hat with an elegant shape and a silk flower on it.

Cole lined up between Twitch and Jace, facing the Rogue Knight. The knight’s shiny armor looked like it must have been washed and burnished an hour before the ambush. Cole did his best not to stand out. The many people in the caravan helped him feel less conspicuous.

The Rogue Knight pointed his sword at Lucinda. “Tell me your name.”

“Lucinda,” she replied.

“Who is your father?”

She straightened bravely. “Alderman Cronin.”

“Interesting,” the Rogue Knight said.

“He will not smile to know what happened here today,” Lucinda said.

“I hope not,” the Rogue Knight replied. “Rustin Sage could use some pressure from other leaders.”

“My father’s anger won’t be directed at Rustin Sage,” Lucinda said.

“Alderman Cronin can react as he pleases,” the Rogue Knight said. “Tell him he should hurry, because after Rustin Sage has been entombed, I’ll come to Carthage, kill Henrick, and expel your father from his office.”

Lips trembling, Lucinda made no reply. Cole felt bad for her.

The Rogue Knight held up his sword. “The name of my blade is Verity,” he declared. “She and I dislike falseness. That includes all forms of illusion. Before we collect your valuables, why not wipe any seemings away?”

He swung his sword in a broad horizontal swipe. Cole felt a brief tingling. Glancing to one side, he saw that Mira now looked like herself, and Skye

looked as he had never seen her. She was still attractive, but a bit leaner, with big blue eyes and a short white-blond pixie haircut. Cole would have guessed she was in her thirties. At the moment, she looked astonished.

“Your seeming is gone,” Jace whispered to Cole.

“We’re in trouble,” Cole said, glancing over toward Konley. To his surprise, Cole saw that Lucinda, still in her dress and hat, was actually a thin old woman with wispy hair and wrinkled features. The nearby guardsmen appeared surprised.

“Konley,” the Rogue Knight said. “I take it this is not the daughter of Alderman Cronin?”

“I’m one of his servants,” the wrinkled woman proclaimed spunkily.

“Explain,” the Rogue Knight said.

“We needed an excuse to join the caravan,” Konley said. “We didn’t want to put the actual Lucinda in harm’s way. My mission was to observe you if you appeared.”

“You have my congratulations,” the Rogue Knight said. “Mission accomplished. My knights will now take custody of your valuables. Please save time by not trying to hide anything of interest. You won’t succeed, and I’ll take every last ringer if you attempt to hold anything back.”

The Rogue Knight pointed to Cole’s coach and Skye’s coach. “For example, these two conveyances have hidden compartments that until recently were disguised by skillful seemings. This is your last chance to voluntarily produce your valuables.”

Cole looked at Joe, who gave a nod. As the knights dismounted and approached the members of the caravan, Cole and Twitch hurried into the coach. Skye went into her coach as well, as did a few of the merchants.

“Think the Rogue Knight noticed my seeming vanish?” Cole asked Twitch once they were inside the coach.

“I don’t think much escapes him,” Twitch said, popping open a little secret door and removing a bag of ringers. “Let’s hope he doesn’t care.”

“I’m worried for Mira,” Cole said.

“Be worried for all of us,” Twitch said. “If Konley or any of his men have our descriptions, it won’t go well after the Rogue Knight leaves.”

Cole itched with anxiety over what would happen next. He was so close to finding Dalton—and now this! At least he was no longer hiding anything from the powerful knight. That brought a small measure of relief. Cole grabbed the remaining ringers and then returned with Twitch to wait to be robbed.

The Rogue Knight approached Skye. “You and the girl were both concealed,” he said to her, holding open a large canvas bag.

Skye dropped ringers and papers into his sack. “It was for our safety,” she replied meekly.

The Rogue Knight extended his bag to Mira, her warped reflection visible on his armor. “There is something familiar about you,” he said.

A chill passed through Cole.

“I’m told that often,” Mira replied, not looking up at him as she handed over her goods.

The Rogue Knight remained before her. “You had best come with me, my lady.”

“What?” Mira asked, raising her eyes.

“You’ll depart with us,” the Rogue Knight said. “In fact, come with me now. My knights can finish without me.” He reached down and took her by the wrist.

Cole could hardly believe it. How did the Rogue Knight know Mira? Cole wanted to interfere, but what could he possibly do that would make any difference?

Skye reached out and gripped the shiny guard protecting the antlered knight’s forearm. “Then take me too,” she said. “The girl and I mustn’t be separated.”

“Remove your hand, woman,” the Rogue Knight said. “The girl will accompany me alone. No harm will befall her.”

Looking uncertain, Skye released his arm and took a step back. The Rogue Knight began leading Mira toward his horse. Glancing at Joe, Cole danced in place with panic. Wasn’t somebody going to do something?

Jace opened the door of the coach, leaned in, and came out with a Jumping Sword. Yelling at the top of his lungs, he raced after the Rogue Knight.

Releasing Mira, the Rogue Knight turned and drew his sword. He blocked one, two, three swings from Jace before kicking him in the chest with the bottom of his boot, sending him sprawling.

Cole winced. Attacking the Rogue Knight had been reckless and hopeless. It was suicide, really. But Cole had never loved Jace more.

The other knights paused their collecting to watch. Jace scrambled to his feet and stabbed his blade at the Rogue Knight, who parried the thrust and dropped Jace with a brisk slap.

“Stay down, lad,” the Rogue Knight said.

Blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, Jace was back on his feet in an instant. He faked twice, then swung hard. The Rogue Knight deflected the attack, then stepped forward and shoved Jace to the ground. Planting a foot on Jace’s chest, the Rogue Knight crouched, pried the Jumping Sword from his grasp, and tossed it aside.

“Phillip,” the Rogue Knight ordered, keeping a boot on Jace’s chest. “Come see that this boy stays down.”

The knight who wielded the battle-ax walked over and pressed his boot on Jace. After leaning close to speak to Phillip, the Rogue Knight returned to Mira and took her arm. Jace squirmed wildly to no avail.

Cole looked up at Joe. “What do we do?”

“We can’t help her if we’re dead,” Joe whispered.

Buzzing with panic, Cole stared as the Rogue Knight led Mira to his big horse. Tears brimmed in his eyes as he watched Jace thrash helplessly. The Rogue Knight obviously knew her identity. Why did he want her? Would she be a hostage? A bargaining chip? Would she be traded so he could get the duel he wanted? Cole had a terrible feeling that if the Rogue Knight rode away with her, he would never see Mira again.

Cole’s eyes went to the Jumping Sword lying unused. Was Jace the only one willing to protect Mira? Would nobody else even try?

Without allowing himself time to reconsider, Cole dropped his bag of ringers and dashed forward. Nobody moved to stop him. He reached the sword and picked it up.



The Rogue Knight had just mounted his horse. Too furious to be terrified, Cole ran at him. The Rogue Knight swung Mira up and sat her in front of him. Only then did she notice Cole coming. “Cole, don’t,” she cried. “There’s nothing you can do.”

Ignoring him, the Rogue Knight turned his horse and flicked the reins. The elite steed started running.

Fueled by desperation, Cole raced with everything he had. At his closest he was five paces away, but that quickly stretched to ten, then twenty. Anger and frustration surged through him. He squeezed the hilt of the Jumping Sword with all his might.

And then Cole felt the hilt vibrating. Brilliant flames blazed along the length of the blade. Though the ghostly fire gave off light, Cole felt no heat. He knew with instinctive certainty that the Jumping Sword had awakened.

With the weapon humming in his hand, Cole pointed it at the fleeing knight and shouted, “Away!”

Feet leaving the ground, Cole rocketed into the air, rushing on a collision course with the fleeing horse. As he zoomed within range, the sword slowed a bit, and Cole thrust it into the Rogue Knight’s back.

The tip did not pierce his armor, but both the knight and Mira pitched forward off the galloping horse. Armor clanging and rattling, the knight cradled his arms protectively around Mira as they madly bounced and rolled, gouging the earth as they went. Cole skidded to a stop as well, but he hurriedly rose to his feet, sword ready.

He heard hoofbeats behind him. Two other knights had mounted up and were coming his way. From her position on the ground, prickles and soil in her hair, Mira looked back at him with wide eyes.

Scuffed, dented, and streaked with dirt, the Rogue Knight’s armor had lost some of its polish as he rose to face Cole. “Who are you?” the knight demanded.

“Get out of here, Cole!” Mira cried.

The Rogue Knight’s riderless mount was curving around back toward them. Cole heard the pounding approach of the two other knights. The

sword enabled Cole to jump far. It didn't make him a master swordsman or enable him to pierce heavy armor. What was he supposed to do now?

"Run, Cole!" Mira yelled.

The oncoming knights were closing in. The Rogue Knight stood protectively in front of Mira. Cole might not be able to defeat the Rogue Knight in a fight, but with the sword, he could probably follow him. But first he had to get away.

With the galloping horses almost upon him, Cole pointed the Jumping Sword at the trees along the edge of the field and called the command. He whooshed through the air, brush skimming by beneath him in a blur. Landing by the trees, he found everyone looking his way. Aiming his sword into the trees, he jumped again, knifing between hefty trunks. He landed far enough into the woods that he could no longer see any knights or the caravan. Crouching down, Cole waited to see who would come after him.

## CHAPTER

# — 16 —

## DIVERGING PATHS

**C**ole waited tensely for knights on horseback to come crashing through the underbrush. He mapped out plans in his mind for where he could jump next. If he led his pursuers far enough into the woods, maybe he could loop back around and catch up to the Rogue Knight. With the Jumping Sword, he had a real chance of tailing him. If the Rogue Knight slipped away, he could probably follow any of his knights and eventually get back to Mira.

But nobody came.

It took about a minute of crouching behind a log with his heart rate gradually slowing for Cole to realize that nobody was in pursuit. He suddenly felt like he was still playing hide-and-seek after the other kids had gone home.

Staying low, Cole crept back toward the field until he could see beyond the trees. The knights were back to collecting valuables from the caravan. Jace was on his feet again. A couple of the knights were organizing the drivers of the wagons. The Rogue Knight and Mira were no longer in view.

Cole had seen which way they had initially gone. If they had continued in that direction, he could probably catch up and follow them. If he failed to find them, he could always double back and follow some of the other knights. The knights overseeing the wagons would be busy for some time.

Rushing to the edge of the trees, Cole pointed his sword and said, "Away," keeping his voice low. Nothing happened. "Away!" he repeated, a little more forcefully, but he didn't even feel a faint tug.

Cole studied the blade. There was no hint of the fire he had seen earlier. Those flames had faded once he'd started jumping. Why had the Jumping Sword stopped working again?

He had been really desperate when he'd run after Mira. Maybe the sword had reacted to his need. Cole pictured the Rogue Knight riding away with his friend. He had to help her! Back in Sambria, flames had never flickered along the blade before. Staring at the sword, Cole willed the flames to return.

No spectral fire appeared. The hilt didn't hum or vibrate.

Holding his breath, clenching the muscles in his gut, Cole mentally commanded the sword to work. "Come on," he muttered. "Away! Away!"

Still nothing happened. Cole slapped the hilt the same way he used to hit a faulty remote control. Nothing. Feeling frustrated and confused, Cole pointed the sword out into the field and growled the command with all the emotion he could muster.

Again, there was no sign that the sword was anything more than a length of sharpened metal. Cole began to feel foolish. If he hadn't helped the sword work, then what had happened? Had it just been a freak accident?

No. He remembered how it had felt when the sword hummed to life in his grasp. Energy or passion or something had flowed from him and into the weapon. But now that feeling was totally gone. Some of the same emotions lingered, but they were not connecting with the Jumping Sword at all.

Cole withdrew back into the trees, worried he had made himself too visible and spoken too loudly when commanding the sword. If the knights came after him now, they would catch him easily.

Squatting behind a bush, watching the confiscated wagons start to roll, Cole had to accept that Mira was gone. He had tried to help her, but in the end it hadn't been enough. Not only had he lost his friends from back home, he was losing new friends, too. Cole felt so sick and empty that he wanted to collapse and surrender.

But he couldn't do that. He had to hang on. Mira didn't need him to feel sorry for her. She needed him to help her. Jenna, Dalton, and the others needed him too.

If the Rogue Knight recognized Mira's value as a hostage, hopefully he would treat her kindly. At least he hadn't seemed unfair or mean-spirited. The Rogue Knight could have killed Jace, but instead just held him down. There had to be some decency in him.

Six of the knights rode off escorting the wagons of merchandise. The other three, including the little one, galloped away in the direction the Rogue Knight had gone. One last time Cole tried the Jumping Sword, and again he was disappointed. If only he could follow them!

As the wagons trundled out of sight, Cole emerged from the woods. The coaches remained stationary. He hurried across the field to his friends, and Skye approached him, gripping him by his shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Cole said.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

Cole gave an uncomfortable laugh. "I don't know. I'm not even sure if I did it."

"You did it all right," Skye said. "I've never sensed any enchanting ability in you, then all of a sudden you were radiating serious power."

"It's gone now," Cole said with a sigh. "The sword is back to normal."

"So are you, as far as I can tell," she said, tousling his hair. "Has anything like that ever happened to you before?"

"Never," Cole said. "Declan told me that one day I would probably develop shaping power."

"I don't know what you developed," Skye said. "But it wasn't any common type of shaping. That sword shouldn't work here. What did you do?"

"I just wanted to help Mira," Cole said. "I don't get what happened."

"And now nothing?" Joe asked, drawing near.

"Nada," Cole confirmed. "After I went into the woods, I tried to follow Mira, but the sword went dead. Nothing I tried would make it work again."

Staring at the woods, Joe stroked his jaw. “I’m going after her,” he said. “The knights didn’t take the extra horses. The dead mercenaries don’t need theirs.”

“I’m coming too,” Jace said.

“No,” Joe replied. “I appreciate the offer, but you’d slow me down.”

Jace looked like he wanted to protest, then dropped his gaze.

“I’ll go,” Twitch said, stretching his wings. “I was already planning to follow the Rogue Knight. You’ll need me.”

Joe paused, then gave a nod. “Sure, I could use your help.”

“We could all go,” Cole said. “There are enough extra horses.”

“No,” Joe said. He looked at Skye. “Seemings won’t do us any good against them.” He glanced at Cole. “Those knights can really fight. They’re more than a match for me, let alone the rest of you. It’s going to take stealth, and I’ll sneak better with just Twitch along. This isn’t over. Skye, take Jace and Cole and see if you can confirm that Honor is the mysterious prisoner at Blackmont Castle. Cole wants to rescue his friend. The boy works at a confidence lounge in Merriston. Maybe the friend has information.”

“Which confidence lounge?” Skye asked.

“The Silver something,” Cole said.

Skye gave an impressed whistle. “The Silver Lining—the oldest confidence lounge in Merriston. It’s the most prestigious in all of Elloweer. Would your friend help us?”

“Count on it,” Cole said. “I have to free him.”

Skye raised her eyebrows. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Twitch and I need to get going,” Joe said. “We don’t want to follow too close, but we mustn’t fall too far behind either. After I get Mira, we’ll come find you. Where should we meet up?”

“The Bloated Udder,” Skye said. “It’s an inn near Edgemont, in Harper’s Crossing.”

Joe took Skye by the hand. “If I don’t make it, you will be Honor’s last hope.” He looked to Cole and Jace. “Find her. Help her.”

Jace gave a nod.

“Save Mira,” Cole told him.

“We’ll get her,” Twitch said. “I’m faster than their horses.”

With that, Twitch hopped away, wings fluttering. Joe hurried over to Monroe. Cole couldn’t hear the words. Monroe scratched his head, then pointed toward some horses. Joe ran to a horse, climbed on, and rode away hard. Twitch had already vanished into the trees.

“Where’s he going?” a voice asked from behind them.

Cole turned to find Konley there, watching Joe ride away. The knight wore no armor and carried no sword.

“The Rogue Knight took my daughter,” Skye said.

“Your daughter?” Konley questioned. “Who are you?”

“Somebody who wanted to travel quietly,” she said.

“I noticed that much,” Konley replied. “You were hidden by elaborate seemings. Why would the Rogue Knight show no special interest in the daughter of Alderman Cronin, or anyone else for that matter, then take your daughter?”

“He knew that wasn’t really the alderman’s daughter,” Skye said. “I have no idea why my poor child caught his eye. Why won’t Rustin Sage man up and face him?”

“That’s his business,” Konley said. “Who are you?”

“My name is Edna Vine,” Skye said. “I own a fine pottery and tableware store in Carthage.”

Hands on his hips, Konley squinted at the trees, then back at Skye. “I think I know the store. It’s called the Vineyard. Not really my kind of place. I don’t know the owner. Could be you. So the Rogue Knight is going to ransom your daughter for plates?”

Skye’s expression hardened. Tears shimmered in her eyes. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

Konley gave a chuckle. “Is that supposed to be acting?” He shifted his attention to Cole. “Who are you, kid? How come you can fly?”

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “Maybe because I wasn’t afraid to try?”

Jace looked away, a spasm of unreleased laughter briefly making his shoulders twitch.

Konley scowled. “Are you calling me a coward?”

“Were you hoping for ‘hero’?” Cole exclaimed. “You gave him your sword! I’m surprised you didn’t shine up his armor!”

Jace couldn’t hold it and laughed hard.

“The boy has a point,” Skye said. “Both of these children attacked the Rogue Knight. Where were you?”

“That’s not the issue,” Konley said uncomfortably. “I carried out my duty as I saw fit.”

“Every coward has his reasons,” Cole murmured.

“What was that?” Konley asked.

“Something a real soldier once told me,” Cole replied.

Konley placed his hands on his hips. “Some important people are looking for a group that matches your description. There was particular interest in the girl. An escaped slave.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Skye said. “None of us are slaves. The Rogue Knight wiped away our seemings. Do you see slavemarks on us? Did you note the freemark on my daughter? I’m living a nightmare, and you’re accusing us of . . . what?”

Monroe came over, a hand on the hilt of his sword. Apparently, the knights had let him retain it. “Is there a problem here?”

“These people were under disguise,” Konley said.

“Lots of people prefer to travel incognito,” Monroe said. “Two of the merchants used seemings as well. One of your party too. These people paid for passage under my protection.”

Konley sneered. “Fine protection you provided.”

“My men died to protect us,” Monroe said. “The one who lived only surrendered after a failed attack. Look to your own people. This remains my caravan. Don’t harass my clients.”

“I was asking after the girl the Rogue Knight took,” Konley said. “I can’t help without information.”

“If you want to help the girl,” Monroe said, “you and your men are welcome to ride to her rescue.”

“We’re not currently equipped to threaten those outlaws,” Konley hedged. “I’ll need reinforcements before I hunt the Rogue Knight.” Konley glanced at



Skye. "I never caught your daughter's name."

"Eleanor," Skye said smoothly. "After her grandmother."

Konley gave a nod. "Right. Carry on, then." He patted Monroe on the arm. "Let's get these coaches back on the road."

Konley walked off. Skye stepped close to Monroe. "I've had some involvement in the resistance. I think he's aware."

Monroe gave a nod. "Aye. He'll make trouble if we let him. What do you mean to do about your daughter?"

"I sent two servants to try to help her," she said. "It's all I can do for now. We need to get to Merriston."

"Do you require anything from your coach?" Monroe asked.

"Not anymore," she said.

"Then take mine," Monroe said. "I'll tell the driver to push hard, and you'll reach Merriston late tonight. After that you're on your own."

"Thank you," Skye said.

"Least I can do," Monroe replied, looking around. "Worst disaster of my career. Here's to hoping the officials in Merriston make it right."

Monroe led them to his coach at the front of the caravan. Cole and Jace climbed in while Skye and Monroe went to talk to the driver.

"You were brave back there," Cole said.

Jace folded his arms across his chest. "Don't."

"What?" Cole replied. "You were!"

"I was no better than that Konley guy," Jace said.

"He didn't even try," Cole said.

"No point in trying if you can't get it done," Jace said. "At least you gave the Rogue Knight something to remember you by."

"I failed too," Cole said.

Jace looked away. "I noticed."

"This isn't over," Cole said.

"It kind of is for me," Jace replied. "You heard Joe. I would just slow him down. I would have worsened his chances to help her. And he was right. That's why I didn't argue."

"He just thought you'd be better at helping Honor," Cole consoled.

“Yeah, right,” Jace huffed. “I bet her guards will be in terror of some kid who doesn’t even know how to use a sword. I’m useless without that rope.”

“Not useless,” Cole said. “Mira needed somebody, and you stepped up.”

“She needed somebody to save her,” Jace said. “Not somebody to get pinned down like a weakling. Do you know what the Rogue Knight said to the other knight who held me? ‘There is no honor in harming a child.’ And he was right. I wasn’t even a threat. I was a baby having a tantrum. If I had my rope, I would have shaken that knight like a bug in a can. They wouldn’t have held me down and shown me mercy. They would have been too busy dying to care how old I was.”

“Mira appreciated what you did,” Cole said.

“She shouldn’t have,” Jace said. “Good intentions aren’t enough, Cole. Remember the sky castles? How many of those scouts do you think intended to die? Here’s a clue—none of them. How many survived? Only a few. Your intentions don’t matter. All that matters is what you can do.”

“We’ll find a way to help her,” Cole said.

“I’ll try,” Jace said. “Even if my best is a pathetic joke, I won’t quit. She’s all I care about. But I’m not what she needs. She deserves so much more than me.”

“She needs people just like you,” Cole said.

“Knock it off! Don’t try to cheer me up. I know what happened. I know what it means.” He started to get choked up. “Mira’s gone, and I couldn’t stop it.” Gritting his teeth, his expression miserable, Jace regained control of himself. “If you want to help, stop bugging me and figure out how you charged up that sword. That might actually be useful.”

## CHAPTER

# 17

## LADY MADELINE

**W**hen Merriston came into view beneath three moons of varied sizes, Cole was no closer to understanding how he had made the Jumping Sword work. He had spent much of the ride trying to replicate what had happened in the field, but no matter how hard he concentrated, or what mind games he played, the Jumping Sword remained inert.

Jace had quietly sulked all day. He would respond to questions, but initiated no conversation, and made no jokes. Skye seemed extra sullen and contemplative as well.

Watch fires brightened the road as they neared the colossal wall. The mammoth gates stood closed. After the coach halted, Cole heard the driver telling a guard how they had been attacked by the Rogue Knight. A few minutes later, the gates groaned open.

“What’s the plan?” Cole asked.

“I told the driver to drop us near Fairview Gardens,” Skye said. “It’s a pleasant part of the city. I’m trying to decide how we can access your friend Dalton.”

The words gave Cole his first happy moment since they’d lost Mira—he was so close now! They were making plans to see him!

“We’re low on funds,” Jace reminded them.

“My main stash was in the couch,” Cole said. “I still have some ringers in my pocket. Just small change, but it might add up to a gold ringer or two. And I have a jewel I got from a sky castle.”

“There are places I can go for money,” Skye said.

“How much does it cost to get into the Silver Lining?” Cole asked.

“Six gold ringers a person, last I heard,” Skye said. “But that’s not the biggest obstacle. Not anyone can buy their way into the Silver Lining. It’s by invitation only.”

“Can somebody in the Unseen help you?” Cole asked.

“I know people who could get us through the front door,” Skye said. “But we don’t really want the front door. If we want to find your friend, we need the back door.”

“If Dalton sees me, he’ll try to make contact,” Cole said.

“Right, if he sees you,” Skye said. “The Silver Lining is enormous and built like a labyrinth. As the biggest and best confidence lounge in Merriston, it is supported by a huge staff. We could visit the Silver Lining multiple times without your friend noticing.”

“So how do we get in the back door?” Cole asked.

Skye furrowed her brow. “I’m a senior member of the Unseen. I’m a gifted enchanter. There has to be some other way.”

“Other way?” Cole asked.

“Security is very tight at the Silver Lining,” Skye said. “Getting into the back with the staff is much harder than getting through the front door. They have some of the best scrubbers in Elloweer.”

“What are scrubbers?” Cole wondered.

“They wipe away illusions,” Skye said. “Verity was basically a powerful scrubber. Before the staff at the confidence lounges place their seemings on you, they want to know who they’re dealing with.”

“So we can’t really use disguises,” Cole said.

“Not seemings,” Skye said. “Not to get inside. We won’t be able to dodge the scrubbers at the checkpoints.”

“Without the scrubbers, can enchanters tell when you’re using a seeming?” Cole wondered.

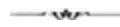
“Not if the seeming is done right,” Skye said. “I’m no novice, and a skilled enchanter can easily fool my eyes. I only know I’m looking at a seeming if the enchanter does sloppy work. That’s why good scrubbers are so valuable.”

“Can somebody sneak us in the back way?” Cole asked.

Skye bit her lip. “Of all my contacts, I can think of only one person who has a chance of succeeding. She isn’t a member of the Unseen, she won’t be willing, and she’s very unpleasant to work with.”

“Who?” Cole asked.

Skye gave a defeated sigh. “My mother.”



After getting dropped off beside lush gardens full of luminescent flowers, Skye guided Cole and Jace along wide, empty streets lined with neat yards and tidy buildings. No lights glowed in any windows.

“Let me do the talking,” Skye instructed. “I know you two like to joke, but my mother was born without a sense of humor. I’ll introduce you as orphans I’ve taken under my wing.”

“True enough,” Jace said.

Cole glanced at Jace. Maybe it was true for him. But Cole had parents who loved him. They might not remember him, and they might live in another world, but they were out there.

It was strange to think that right now, his mom, dad, and sister were living their ordinary lives back in Mesa. Didn’t they notice his stuff in his room? Didn’t they wonder who the kid was in the pictures with them? He would find a way back to them and make them remember. There had to be a way.

“Only talk if she speaks to you,” Skye went on. “Be brief and polite. Don’t mention my dazzle show. Or the rebellion. Try to look as innocent as possible.”

“You sound scared of her,” Cole said.

“That’s right,” Skye agreed. “It wouldn’t shock me if she turned us in.”

“But you think she’ll help us sneak into the Silver Lining?” Jace asked.

“Not if she thinks we’re sneaking,” Skye said. “I have a plan.”

She stopped outside a gate and stared up at a stately townhouse. Squaring her shoulders, Skye opened the gate and led them up to the front door. As with the surrounding homes, the windows were dark.

“Isn’t it kind of late?” Cole whispered.

“Believe me,” Skye said, “this will be equally miserable at any hour. Catching her a little off-balance may work to our advantage.”

Skye knocked loudly. Before long, a light came on, and a butler in a dark suit answered the door, holding a fragile lantern. Cole wondered if the guy slept in his clothes, although they looked neatly pressed. He was balding, with noble features, and he considered them with disdain. “Are you aware of the hour?”

“Yes, Jepson,” Skye said. “I’m here to visit my mother.”

“Lady Madeline has retired for the evening,” Jepson said. He poked his head out the door and glanced up and down the quiet street. “As has everyone else in the neighborhood.”

Skye walked right through Jepson, as if he were nothing more than a hologram. The butler blinked in annoyance, then turned to face her. Cole heard a low growl.

“Hush, Kimber,” Skye said, crouching to let a dog sniff her, then massaging the loose skin behind its neck.

“It is discourteous to invade my boundaries,” Jepson chided.

“Not as discourteous as turning away your employer’s only child,” Skye shot back. “Do you think I’d be here if it wasn’t important? Please wake her.”

“As you insist,” he said with a slight bow. He turned to the door. “Am I to understand these urchins form your entourage?”

“They’re with me, yes,” Skye replied. “Come in, boys.”

“Are you certain they’re safe?” Jepson asked, eyeing them warily.

“I’m positive,” Skye said.

Cole stepped through the door, careful not to touch the butler. Jace came after him.

“Kimber, door,” Jepson said.

The dog padded away from Skye and nudged the door shut.

Jepson faced Skye stiffly. “You may wait in the parlor. Please encourage the young gentlemen to keep their hands off the furnishings.”

The butler went up the stairs, taking the small lantern with him. Skye produced a glowing orb in her hand to replace the lost light. She led the boys down a hall floored with glossy, reddish wood. Cole passed a vibrant floral arrangement in a delicate, pale green vase. A sliding wooden door granted access to the parlor.

The room had a high coffered ceiling, a huge marble fireplace, and a floor where narrow, crisscrossing boards formed complex patterns. A tall grandfather clock stood against one wall, pendulum swinging. All the furniture looked too expensive to use.

Skye tossed her orb up, and it split apart, darting to various glass objects around the room and filling them with light. The objects worked as lamps, illuminating the room evenly.

“How’d you walk through Jepson?” Cole asked.

“He’s a figment,” Skye said. “An autonomous seeming that mimics life. Like a semblance with no substance, made of pure illusion.”

“Are there many figments around?” Cole asked.

“They’re not common,” Skye said. “Figments are extremely difficult to create. I’m no rookie with seemings, and I can’t make one. My mother has some skills as an enchantress, but a figment is far beyond her abilities as well. I’m not sure anyone in Elloweer, besides the Grand Shaper, could currently make a figment with enough complexity to imitate a human being. Mother inherited Jepson from her parents. He has been in the family for generations.”

“He didn’t actually open the door,” Cole realized.

“Right,” Skye said. “Kimber did. Jepson partners with trained dogs. He trains them himself—no small feat when he can’t pet them or directly feed them. Each dog is named Kimber. The current Kimber is looking old. I’ve seen her twice before, I think. He’s probably already working with a replacement.”

They sat in silence for a moment. The clock tolled the half hour. Cole saw that the clock read six thirty. He pointed at it. “Does that mean six and a half hours since sunset?” Cole asked.

“That’s right,” Skye said. “Sometimes I forget you’re from outside. Those with clocks reset them to twelve at dawn and at sunset. Some nights are eight hours long. Some are fourteen. Eleven or so is most typical.”

“How’d your mom get so loaded?” Jace asked.

“She inherited most of her fortune,” Skye said. “Father worked with a local bank. He passed away more than ten years ago. My great-grandfather was a well-regarded alderman. He accomplished a lot of good for Merriston and for Elloweer. Mother keeps a busy calendar, but doesn’t really do much. She knows everyone, though.”

“Do you think she’ll help us?” Cole asked.

“There’s a chance, or we wouldn’t be here,” Skye said. “It depends. She’ll make us wait before appearing. It’s all part of the social games she plays. You might want to get comfortable.”

Cole sat down on a soft armchair. Jace lay down on a sofa. Cole only lasted five minutes or so before his eyes began to droop.

He awoke with Skye shaking his shoulder. “She’s coming,” she said. “Look alive.”

Standing up, Cole rubbed his face, hoping to wipe away the signs of sleep. His mouth tasted fuzzy, and his eyes didn’t want to focus quite right. According to the clock, they had been waiting for nearly an hour.

Lady Madeline glided slowly into the room and regarded her daughter coldly. She was old, with painted eyebrows and a gray pile of hair pinned at the top of her head. Slightly plump, she wore a dark dress with sleeves and a long, full skirt that rustled as she moved. Many rings sparkled on her fingers, and gems dangled from her earlobes. She carried a black cane, though she didn’t appear to need it.

“This seems an appropriate hour for a visit from a spy,” Lady Madeline said, her voice proper and authoritative, her words clearly pronounced. “At least there is a chance my neighbors did not see you enter. What possesses you, child?”

“I just got to town,” Skye said. “My caravan was attacked by the Rogue Knight.”



“Ah,” Lady Madeline said. “All is clear. You are famously successful and came here to turn over a new leaf, but the Rogue Knight took all your money, so you need an enormous loan to tide you over. You didn’t happen to discover his identity?”

“No, Mother.”

Lady Madeline shook her head. “If you’re going to be a spy, child, at least learn your trade.”

“I’m not a spy,” Skye said.

“Of course not,” Lady Madeline patronized. “You’re a revolutionary. One of those invisible people. I considered ‘spy’ a kinder term than ‘criminal’ or ‘traitor.’ How would you prefer me to label you?”

“For starters, I’m your daughter,” Skye said.

Lady Madeline shook her head sadly. “I am too literal to pretend. If you wish for me to view you as my daughter, you must act the part. I gave up any hope of that long ago.”

Cole stole a glance at Jace. His friend widened his eyes to convey astonishment. Lady Madeline seemed like the harshest mom ever! Why did Skye think she might help them?

Lady Madeline looked Cole’s way. “I see you brought along some of your fellow anarchists. Is it just me, or are your cohorts getting younger and younger? What would their poor mothers say about you keeping them up so long past their bedtimes?”

“This is Cole and Jace,” Skye said. “They have no parents. I’ve hired them as servants. They were with the ambushed caravan.”

“Hired orphans?” Lady Madeline exclaimed, eyebrows rising. “What luck! I suppose parents prove inconvenient when you pay children to overhear conversations and peep through windows. But relatives needn’t always function as barriers. Lady Fink’s daughter, Emilia, is expecting a child. Should I inform them that you are recruiting?”

“Thanks for your understanding,” Skye said. “Your mockery is exactly what we all needed after being robbed.”

“I was merely commenting on your life, dear,” Lady Madeline said. “If it comes across as ridicule, perhaps you should reassess your choices.”

Skye sighed wearily. “My involvement in the resistance has only led to hardship. I came here looking for honest employment. I hope to find work at the Silver Lining.”

Laying a hand on her bosom, Lady Madeline leaned her head back for a prolonged, joyless laugh. “If a confidence lounge has become your idea of honest work, let us pause to lament how far you have fallen.”

“The Silver Lining operates with approval from the champion, the alderman, and the High King,” Skye said. “Have you never crossed the threshold there? How many of your friends have abstained? The Silver Lining needs talented illusionists, and I’m one of the best.”

“You have talent,” Lady Madeline said sadly. “It only emphasizes your squandered potential. You could have had all the right people on your side. Instead, you willfully made enemies of them. Do I believe for one instant that you have changed? We both know the Silver Lining is where revolutionaries go to die. Like moths drawn to a bonfire, they are lured in by a lust for secrets, and they are inevitably destroyed. If you go to work at the Silver Lining, you’ll end up in Blackmont Castle before the week is out.”

Her harsh attitude about the Silver Lining made Cole anxious, though he tried not to show it. Skye didn’t think they could reach Dalton without her mother’s aid, but Lady Madeline didn’t seem willing to help them. They were so close! Would they be defeated here, in a stuffy parlor in the middle of the night?

“I want to interview for employment there,” Skye said. “My reputation was bad at Wenley, and not good in Carthage, but here I can use my actual name and wear my true face.”

“In other words, there are no warrants for your arrest in Merriston,” Lady Madeline scoffed. “No bounties on your head. Not yet, at any rate. Nobody trusts you, Skye. Your reputation is spoiled.”

“Not with everyone,” Cole said, unable to contain himself.

Lady Madeline regarded him coolly. “Your opinions hardly count if you’re paid to have them. Don’t forget that you’re also paid to hold your tongue when in the presence of your betters.”

“It’s all right, Cole,” Skye said. “You don’t need to defend me. Mother, are you saying Gustus wouldn’t consider me?”

“I could set up an interview for you with Gustus at my leisure,” Lady Madeline said. “He might even hire you. But it would only be to put you under constant watch. You will enter to spy, but the opposite will happen. All your dealings will be laid bare to them. It would be the end of you.”

Skye approached her mother and took one of her hands in both of hers. “Mother, listen. I need your help. An interview with Gustus is important to me right now. I’m no novice. I’m not going to try to beat the owners of the Silver Lining at their own game. But I am strongly considering a return to Merriston. An interview with Gustus will teach me volumes about my standing here.”

“You don’t need an interview for that,” Lady Madeline said. “I do not overstate the matter when I say your reputation is utterly ruined. Using your true identity, you would be under surveillance every hour of the day and night. You might even be detained on sight. Were you really assaulted by the Rogue Knight? Will that outrageous tale be confirmed?”

“I was,” Skye said. “Those two boys both took up arms against him. He left them with their lives. The Rogue Knight stripped me of promissory notes and cash amounting to over three hundred platinum ringers. I still have major holdings in Carthage, though they are under assumed names.”

“Three hundred platinum!” Lady Madeline exclaimed. “Did you plunder the hoard of some pirate king?”

“If you must know, I ran a successful dazzle show.”

Groaning, Lady Madeline covered her eyes. “Skylark! I would prefer a dozen spies to an entertainer.”

“She’s really good,” Cole said. “The best. You should have heard the people applaud!”

“You certainly have support from the hired orphan.” Lady Madeline moaned. She placed a hand to her forehead. “Skylark, I don’t believe I can take much more.”

“I used assumed identities,” Skye said.

“You must have, or else I would already be the laughingstock of Elloweer. Child, how could you?”

“Sometimes we do what we must to survive,” Skye said. “And sometimes we do what we must because of what we believe. Do you truly love the High King, mother?”

“What does it matter?” Lady Madeline exclaimed. “The sun shines. Sometimes it burns too hot, sometimes it bothers the eyes, but it is a reality of life, and so we live beneath its glare and seek shade and shelter as needed. The High King rules. He is not perfect, he sometimes elevates buffoons, he indulges his vanity on occasion, but this is the world we live in. Why not prosper in spite of him? Must he become an excuse to destroy ourselves?”

“Some people can turn a blind eye to what’s wrong in the world,” Skye said. “Some people cannot. I have my flaws, Mother, but I can honestly tell you that I try to do what I think is right.”

“You are a bothersome child,” Lady Madeline said. “You need fewer opinions and more practicality.”

“I need an interview with Gustus,” Skye said. “I want to bring my two young servants with me. They could help out behind the scenes at the Silver Lining.”

“Far behind the scenes, I hope,” Lady Madeline said. “Wearing gags.”

“We’re right here,” Cole said.

Lady Madeline ignored him. Setting her cane aside, she patted her daughter’s hand. “I fear that Gustus would gladly give you enough rope with which to hang yourself.”

“What I do with it may surprise him,” Skye said.

“I take it I will have no peace until I grant you this favor,” Lady Madeline said.

“None,” Skye said. “I must have the interview.”

“At least you’re not begging for money,” Lady Madeline said. “Or trying to interact with my friends.” She shivered theatrically.

“Thank you, Mother,” Skye said.

“Thanks,” Cole added sincerely. He had been braced for Lady Madeline to reject their request. They were going to find Dalton! It was actually

happening! How long would it take before they came face-to-face?

“Thank me with your silence,” Lady Madeline scolded Cole, fanning herself. She turned to address Skye again. “Am I to understand that you and your stalwart footmen expect to sleep here tonight?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble,” Skye said.

“It is far from ideal, but I can hardly throw you out,” she replied. “You know where to find the guest rooms. Try not to advertise your presence. I will send a message to Gustus in the morning. It normally takes months to earn a response from him. Expect an interview by the afternoon. I hope you know what you’re doing, Skylark.”

Skye kissed her mother on the cheek. “So do I.”

## CHAPTER

# 18

## THE SILVER LINING

**L**ate the following morning, Cole, Jace, and Skye climbed out of a hired coach and onto a shabby street corner. They all wore new clothes that had been dropped by the townhouse late that morning, and Skye carried a written invitation. She looked prim in a white blouse and tweed skirt. Cole and Jace wore buttoned shirts, pressed trousers, and brown leather shoes.

Skye led the way to an alley between a run-down pawnshop and a moneylender. Iron grates guarded the windows of both businesses. The cobblestone roadway was knobby enough that Cole worried about turning an ankle.

As they reached the entrance of the alley, a pair of tough guys detached from the wall to bar the way. One of them wore a flat cap and had a pronounced underbite. The other had a wide scar that curved from below one ear to his upper lip.

“Nice folks don’t go this way,” said the guy with the underbite. He kept both hands in his pockets.

“None of us are nice,” Skye replied.

The thugs parted to let them pass. Cole hurried after Skye, keeping his eyes on the uneven cobblestones.

The first stretch of the alley curved. When it straightened, Cole saw that it ran onward for an unrealistic distance, shrinking to nothing before an end came into view. Merriston was a large city, but Cole didn't think it was big enough to contain this alley.

"No way," Jace said.

"Illusion," Skye replied. "If we go too far, we'll step through false ground and into a pit filled with spikes. Or something equally delightful."

Cole noticed Jace slowed his pace, keeping Skye and Cole a little ahead of him. He hadn't survived so many Sky Raider missions by being stupid.

The rough walls of the alley, constructed from fitted stone blocks, soared unusually high on both sides, with no doors or windows. Ivy spilled down from the top in some places. Skye held her invitation in one hand, glancing at it as they walked.

"Do you have a map on there?" Cole asked.

"No map," she said. "But as we approached the alley, the card told me what to say when those thugs asked for the password. Mother suggested I keep it handy."

"What are we looking for?" Cole asked.

"This leads to a service entrance," Skye said. "I bet sections of these walls are false. There must be many hidden defenses. We've already passed a few scrubbers. We're almost certainly being watched."

Cole decided not to talk too much if they might be overheard. Most of this mission would be played by ear. The Silver Lining was only open in the evenings, and through the night. Since the confidence lounge was currently closed, the workers were either sleeping, relaxing, studying, or doing behind-the-scenes chores. Cole, Jace, and Skye would poke their noses into as many places as possible in the hope of coming across Dalton.

Cole could barely believe he was about to see his best friend. Dalton would be so surprised. Cole wondered how he would have felt if Dalton had just shown up one day to rescue him from the Sky Raiders. It was too mind-blowing to really imagine.

Skye stopped. "See?" She held up the invitation. All it had on it was an arrow pointing left. "This just appeared."

Turning left, Skye experimentally pushed a hand through the wall. They passed through the seeming into a dim, narrow stairwell that descended to an iron door. Cole noticed that the arrow vanished from the invitation and a quote appeared: “Nobody else deserves me.”

A string dangled from a small hole in the door. Skye tugged it, and a bell clanged. A moment later, a peephole slid open. “Why should we let you in?” a man asked.

“Nobody else deserves me,” Skye replied.

The door opened. They passed a few armed guards and reached a second iron door. A guard there tapped an elaborate rhythm on the door with a small hammer. It opened, and they kept going.

They walked up a staircase and into a lovely courtyard. Flamingos waded in a dark, shallow pond. Trees with deeply grooved bark grew in fancifully contorted shapes. Dressed in togas, lovely women and handsome men roamed winding paths, softly playing a variety of instruments. The area smelled of moss and damp grass.

A woman with metallic golden skin and vibrant orange eyes approached them. “Skye Ryland?” she asked.

“Yes,” Skye replied, showing the invitation. “Along with my two young friends.”

“Please follow me,” the woman said. They crossed the courtyard to a heavy wooden door and entered a grand hall full of large portraits. Cole saw a few people walking around, all dressed in gray robes. One was about his age.

None were Dalton.

They walked through an insubstantial fireplace full of blazing logs and into another hallway. After passing several doors, the woman showed them through a mirror at the end of the hall.

Cole found himself in a spacious office. The entire back wall was the side of an enormous aquarium where three white narwhals swam, horns shining like silver. At a desk before the aquarium sat a plump man, bald on top, but with long gray hair dangling along the edges. He seemed like a regular human except for his eyes—bulbous mounds with tiny holes at the peaks. They swiveled like a chameleon’s.



The man rose as they entered. "Skye Ryland," he said, opening his arms wide and smiling. "I never expected to see you here."

"Hello, Gustus," she said. "This is Cole and Jace."

"Splendid boys, no doubt," he said without a trace of sincerity. "The last time I saw you, I believe you were chased out of a party I attended."

"Good memory," Skye said.

"I understand you're looking for work?" he asked, coming around to stand in front of his desk.

"That's right," Skye said.

"Imagine my surprise when Lady Madeline contacted me this morning," he said. "I used to drop hints about you coming to work for me. Those advances never drew any interest."

"Many choices are determined by timing," Skye said.

Gustus leaned back against his desk. "Interesting thought. Why reach out to me now? Common knowledge has you involved with revolutionaries."

"I've lived a little," Skye said. "Learned some hard lessons. I want something stable. I want to work on my enchanting. I could be useful here. My abilities have increased."

Gustus wagged a finger at her. "That I believe. I'm not concerned about your talent. I'm more interested in your motives. I'd hate for your dear mother to suffer another blow. You'll get eaten alive if you think you can use a position here to help the resistance. Absolutely skeletonized."

"I didn't come to you when I was involved with those people," Skye said.

"Those people?" Gustus chuckled. "Am I to believe you've severed all ties, burned all bridges?"

"I've made some big changes in my life," Skye said. "I'd be a fool to come here with an agenda."

"It was foolish to come here at all," Gustus said. "When I told Alderman Campos about the message from your mother, he almost posted guardsmen here to arrest you. We debated the issue for the better part of an hour. In the end, he became more interested in watching you. Not in the hope you'll prove you've mended your ways. He decided this move is so preposterous, it

must be motivated by a tremendous need. A need none of us can guess. What game are you playing, Skye?"

"He can watch all he likes," Skye said. "So can you. All you'll see is a first-class illusionist practicing her trade."

Gustus rubbed a hand over his bald scalp. "Yes, yes, I suppose . . . I can't fathom what you would expect to gain. Neither can Campos. It's a recipe for curiosity. Up until this moment, you've practiced your spycraft with such aplomb. You had disappeared. You were truly unseen. And now you surface here. A neutral observer would call it a massive blunder."

"Unless I'm serious," Skye said. "Unless I have no hidden motives."

"Wouldn't that be amusing?" Gustus said. "What about these boys?" His bulging eyes swiveled to regard Cole and Jace. "Are they talented?"

"No," Skye said. "They're my servants. I'm fond of them. We're a package deal."

"Which of you is Cole?" Gustus asked enthusiastically.

"I am," Cole said, on his guard even more because of the friendly attitude.

"What is she up to?" Gustus asked chummily.

"She wants a job here," Cole said.

"What has she been doing?"

"Not much," Cole said.

"What do you do for her?"

"I help out," Cole said. "I serve her meals. I get the door."

Gustus walked over to Cole and crouched forward, his chameleon eyes twitching out of sync with each other. "There is a hint of shaping ability about you," he said. "Something . . . odd. I don't recognize it."

"Neither do I," Cole said truthfully.

Gustus turned to Jace. "Tell me why Skye is really here, and I will make you rich beyond your wildest imaginings."

"I've worked for some wealthy people," Jace said. "And I have a good imagination."

"I'll give you enough to live comfortably for the rest of your days. She can't punish you here. Tell me what I want to know and you're set for life."

"Really?" Jace asked.

“Yes.”

Jace shrugged. “Easiest money I’ve ever made. She’s here for a job.”

Gustus stared at him shrewdly. “You profess there is no other motive?”

“Yes.”

“Give it five years. If Skye remains true, I’ll owe you. Fair?”

“It was a big promise for such an easy question,” Jace said. “I can wait.”

“Or you can visit me privately,” Gustus said. “If you have good information, my offer still stands. It’s up to you.” He went to Skye. “Your servants are not useless. Neither boy was completely forthright with me, that much was plain, but I’m not sure what they’re hiding. Not bad for young ones.”

“You see deception wherever you look,” Skye said.

“As long as I look at people,” Gustus replied. “Surely you grasp why some might question your motives. If you had been imprisoned and then made this offer, I’d be more inclined to believe you, though less eager to grant the request.”

“Does this mean I get the job?” Skye asked.

“Of course I’ll hire you,” Gustus said. “You’re plenty qualified, and I’m infinitely curious to learn what this is really about.” He licked his lips, eyes stretching. “It’s hard to resist a good intrigue.”

“Before I agree,” Skye said, “I want to see where I’ll be working, know how I’ll be compensated, and meet some of my fellow enchanters. I take it you provide accommodations?”

“The staff all live here,” Gustus said. “We’re a tight-knit family.”

“When can I start?” Skye asked.

“I’d prefer immediately,” Gustus said.

“Not today,” Skye said. “I have to say some good-byes and set some affairs in order. Tomorrow could work, if I like the accommodations and your terms.”

“Take care what affairs you manage,” Gustus said. “Many eyes will be watching.”

“And the boys?” Skye asked.

Gustus went and stood between Jace and Cole. “You two want to live and work here?”

“If Skye does,” Cole said.

“I’d be your boss,” Gustus explained. “You’d take orders from some of my underlings. Not from her.”

“I want to make sure I like it here,” Jace said.

“Have a look around with Skye,” Gustus said. “Only fair. Incidentally, without enchanting talent, it’s very competitive to be even the lowest servant here. We only hire the sharpest people from the best families in Elloweer.”

“They won’t disappoint,” Skye promised.

“Make no mistake,” Gustus said, looking from Cole to Jace and back. “Skye is your ticket in here. Whether you stay is up to you. Follow orders, work hard, be courteous, and you’ll do fine.”

“Thank you,” Cole said, silently hoping they were almost done. It felt ridiculous to jump through all these hoops when he knew they didn’t actually plan on staying any longer than it took to find Dalton. Cole had waited a long time to see his friend again, and now that they were so close, every second of delay was torture.

Gustus returned to his desk and sat down. “Skye, have your look around, then return and speak with me. Leave the boys outside next time.” He waved one hand.

The woman with golden skin entered the room. “Yes, Gustus,” she said.

“Leona, escort these three around the grounds,” he said. “Show them where they would stay if they join us here. Introduce them as seems prudent. Then bring them back here.”

“As you will,” Leona said. She touched Skye’s elbow. “Come.”

They walked out of the mirror and back into the hall. Leona led the way.

“How did you know Gustus wanted you?” Cole asked Leona.

“A light flashed in the hall,” she said. “A simple seeming.”

They walked out through the fireplace, and Leona began a tour. They passed fountains of molten lava, tapestries that moved like television screens, and a pair of stone statues grunting and maneuvering in an endless wrestling

match. Cole couldn't really appreciate the impressive seemings or the beautiful grounds. He was watching for his friend.

The servants' quarters were set up like dormitories. Senior servants had their own rooms. Younger servants were two or even four to a room.

Cole saw lots of people, young and old. None had slavemarks. None were Dalton.

They strolled through a cafeteria, then crossed a recreation area where clusters of people bowled wooden balls across a carefully manicured lawn. Cole couldn't figure out the rules to the game. He didn't spot his friend among them.

The quarters for enchanters were much nicer than the servants' dormitories. Each enchanter had multiple rooms, elegantly furnished. The enchanters all wore gray robes and slippers. Leona introduced Skye to a few people. Everyone was generally cordial.

"You've now seen most of the areas where you would live," Leona said as they exited the enchanters' quarters to a verdant area filled with lush bushes and trees. "I can't show you around the lounge itself—those secrets are only for those already employed here."

"I've been to this confidence lounge many times," Skye said.

"Not behind the walls," Leona corrected. "Shall we return to Gustus?"

"What about slaves who enchant?" Skye said. "I understand the Silver Lining has some of the best."

"True," Leona said. "They have their own quarters that way." She pointed toward a low stone building partly obscured by shrubs and trees. "There's no reason for us to bother with them."

"I'd enjoy a demonstration from some of them," Skye said.

Leona eyed her warily. "We've seen enough. There will be plenty of time to meet everyone if you go under contract."

Skye sighed. "All right. Lead on."

As soon as Leona turned to lead the way, Skye grabbed her in a tight choke hold, one hand tight over her mouth. In a blink, they stood apart, conversing quietly.

"What is going—" Cole began.

“Illusion,” Jace said. “Just stand here and look normal.”

After a long moment conversing, Skye and Leona wandered over to a bush. They both crouched down behind the bush, out of sight. Then Leona came out, golden skin shimmering.

“All right,” Leona said in Skye’s voice. “I’ll soon be a wanted criminal in Merriston as well. Mother will be so proud. We find Dalton now or never.”

“You knocked her out?” Jace asked.

“I can’t guarantee for how long,” Skye said, starting toward the low building.

“I thought this place was full of scrubbers,” Cole said, knots of worry tightening in his stomach.

“It is,” Skye said. “I’ll have to rebuild the illusion every time it washes away. I’m pretty fast with temporary stuff like this, but nobody is perfect. We don’t want people to catch sight of us when my disguise flickers.”

They reached a doorway into the low stone building. “Doorways are the most likely places to put scrubbers,” Skye said. “Make sure nobody is looking.”

Cole opened the door and saw a clear hallway. “We’re good.”

Skye stepped inside. For an instant her golden skin and orange eyes completely vanished. She was herself. After less than a second, the disguise was back in place.

They followed the hall to a common room. A couple of teenage guys in gray robes were playing billiards. A woman in gray robes sat reading. Cole still didn’t see Dalton.

The teens stopped playing when they noticed Skye. “Can we help you, Leona?” one of them asked, clearly uncomfortable to see her.

“I’m looking for Dalton,” Skye said in Leona’s voice.

“I think he’s in his room,” the other teen said.

“I don’t recall which is his,” Skye told them.

“Number twenty-three,” the first teen said, pointing down one of the halls that branched from the common area.

“Thank you,” Skye said, leading Cole and Jace in the suggested direction.

Cole's insides fluttered with nervous anticipation as he watched the numbers on the doors. Was he really about to finally find his friend? He had always meant to succeed, but he now realized how much he had also doubted.

They reached number twenty-three. Skye motioned for Cole to knock. He did. They waited. He knocked again, louder. They heard a lock disengage, and the door opened to reveal Dalton standing there with bleary eyes and messy hair.

The last time Cole had seen Dalton, his friend had looked like a dusty, sad clown. Now his friend wore gray robes, but otherwise looked normal.

Dalton's gaze first went up to Skye. Then his stare dropped to Cole. His eyes widened, and his hands covered his mouth. "No way," he whispered. "Is that really you?"

Cole relished the stunned expression on that familiar face. For a moment, he couldn't speak. What was there to say? How could he possibly sum up all he felt?

"Surprise," Cole managed. "Can we come in?"

Dalton's eyes darted back up to Leona.

"It's not really her," Cole confided.

Eyes shimmering with tears, Dalton backed away. "Come on in."

## CHAPTER

# 19

## DALTON

**C**ole paused in the doorway. Everything in his life had been ripped away from him—his home, his family, his school, his neighborhood, and his friends. He'd even lost the other unlucky kids who had come here with him from Arizona. The Outskirts was a huge place. He might never have found anyone from his former life.

But here was Dalton! An honest-to-goodness piece of home! Seeing his best friend forced Cole to recognize how truly isolated he had felt. He was a stranger in a foreign land, but the sight of Dalton made much of that recede into the background.

Cole stepped into the room. Skye followed, as did Jace, who closed the door.

Dalton tried to say something, stopped, then tried again. "It's really you?" He glanced at Skye. "It's not a trick?"

Skye dropped her disguise, looking like herself rather than Leona. "No trick," she promised.

Dalton's smile radiated joy. "I knew it!" he exclaimed, pumping his fist. "I knew you'd come, and I can't believe it! It didn't seem possible, but I kept hoping." He ran to Cole and hugged him.



Cole hugged his friend back, relief washing over him. Whatever else happened, at least he had found Dalton. In many ways, it was more than he truly expected to accomplish.

Cole ended the embrace first. He realized he hadn't ever hugged his friend before, but it hadn't felt weird. So far from home, Dalton seemed more like a lost brother than a buddy. He felt like family.

"I worried you were dead," Dalton admitted. "You went to the Sky Raiders. Everyone said it was incredibly dangerous."

"It was," Cole said. "But I got free. Now I'm part of the resistance. We're going to get you out of here."

"How'd you guys get in here?" Dalton asked. "The security is amazing."

"Skye has connections," Cole said.

"Must be good connections," Dalton said. He centered his gaze on Cole. "You actually came for me. I knew you would try."

"You have to decide quickly if you're coming with us," Cole said. "We left the real Leona unconscious."

Dalton sucked in a terrified breath. "Really? Oh, man, she is going to be mad."

"Lots of people are going to be mad," Cole said. "We have to hurry. Now or never. You're coming, right?"

Dalton hesitated. "This is really sudden."

"I know," Cole said. What if Dalton was like Jill? What if he wanted to stay where he was? Cole tried not to panic. That wouldn't happen. This was Dalton. "You're probably comfortable here. But you're working for the bad guys."

"I get it," Dalton said. "It's just that the bad guys run everything. If you're on their side, they treat you all right. I'm a slave, Cole. I'm marked."

"So was I," Cole said, holding out his arm with the freemark.

"How'd you do that?" Dalton exclaimed. "Seemings won't hold over slavemarks. At least not the way they reinforce them in Elloweer."

"The resistance is stronger than you know," Cole said. "There's a lot going on. I'll fill you in. But we have to go now."

Dalton took a steadying breath. He looked to Jace. "I'm Dalton."

“I’m Jace. We’re wasting time.”

“Dalton,” Skye said. “I’m a member of a secret resistance organization. We’ve helped hundreds of slaves find freedom. We can help you.”

“You’re one of the Unseen?” Dalton asked.

“Yes,” Skye said.

“All right, Cole,” Dalton said. “I’m with you. What’s the plan?”

Cole grinned, then looked to Skye.

“Can you make yourself look like me?” she asked.

“With a little time,” Dalton said. “Pretty much all I do around here is make people look different all day. I get lots of practice.”

She pointed at him, and suddenly Dalton could have been her twin. He went and looked in the mirror on the wall. “That was fast,” he said. It was weird to hear his voice coming from Skye’s form. “Awesome work. You’re good.”

“Can you replicate it?” Skye asked. “Do you see how I did it?”

“I think I can copy it,” Dalton said.

Skye waved a hand, and he looked like himself again. Dalton closed one eye and scrunched his face. Within a few seconds, he looked like Skye.

“Whoa!” Cole exclaimed. “You did that?”

“Not bad,” Skye said. “Can you do it faster?”

“Maybe two seconds,” Dalton said. Though he looked like Skye, he still had his own voice. “You want me to bring it back up after every scrubber?”

“That’s the idea,” Skye said.

“How are we getting out?” Dalton asked.

“The only way I know,” Skye said. “The same way we came in.”

“Not through the tunnel by the flamingos,” Dalton said.

“Why not?” Skye replied.

Dalton gave a nervous laugh and shook his head. “The security is unbeatable there. A whole section of that hall works like one big scrubber. Plus, the alley is a nightmare. We’d get caught for sure.”

“Do you know another way?” Skye asked.

“There are lots of ways in and out of the Silver Lining,” Dalton said. “The head people don’t want to come and go through all the security. There was a

really good way open until last week, when they caught some slaves using it and shut it down. I know one other way some of the guys use to sneak out sometimes.”

“Have you used it?” Skye asked.

“No,” Dalton said. “A few slaves I know like to sneak into town. I didn’t think it was worth the risk just to goof around.”

“It’s unguarded?” Skye asked.

“Just one guard station,” Dalton said. “Somebody sabotaged the scrubber. It works, but they weakened it. If you concentrate hard enough, you can hold your seeming together. You just have to look like somebody with access, and you’re through.”

“Can we get there?” Skye asked. “Are there many scrubbers along the way?”

“Not many,” Dalton said. “We’ll get scrubbed when we leave this building and when we enter the museum. Then we just have to make it through the damaged scrubber by the guard.”

“Who would have access?” Skye asked.

“Leona, for one,” Dalton said. “I can show you which people the other slaves use.” Dalton changed from Skye to a middle-aged man with a receding hairline. Then he became a woman with bluish skin and goat horns. And finally an older woman with curly hair.

“Okay,” Skye said. “I can do those. Can you speak like any of them?”

“I’m no good with voices yet,” Dalton said.

“Do you have a preference?” Skye asked.

“I’ll be the guy,” Dalton said.

“That makes you two the women,” Skye said to Cole and Jace. “I have Leona’s voice down, so I’ll be her. Leave the talking to me. Let’s go.”

Dalton darted around the room, stuffing items into a knapsack. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll show you the best way out.”

Without any seemings, they avoided heading back toward the common room. After passing around a corner, they exited the building. Once outside, Skye became Leona, Dalton became the guy with thinning hair, Jace became the old lady with curly hair, and Cole assumed he was the horned woman.

“Good job,” Skye said to Dalton in Leona’s voice. “You can take care of yourself?”

“I think so,” Dalton said. “That leaves you with three seemings to replace and maintain. Can you make it through the guarded scrubber?”

“If it’s weak enough for most enchanters to hold a seeming together, I can manage three.”

“This way,” Dalton said.

Several heads turned their way as the group walked across an open area. One man in gray robes waved. Cole gave a little wave back. Their seemings were obviously recognizable people.

“Walk purposefully,” Skye muttered.

Cole felt excruciatingly vulnerable. He could see the illusions covering the others, but he wished he could see his own seeming. What if somebody wanted to talk to one of them besides Skye? What if they ran into one of the people they were impersonating? If anybody caught on, it was all over.

Dalton led them onto a winding gravel path beneath some trees. Soon there were no other people in view.

“The museum isn’t used much,” Dalton said. “Mostly just VIP tours now and then. Shouldn’t be crowded. There’s a guard near the front doors. I don’t know another way in.”

“Scrubber at the doors?” Skye asked.

“Right,” Dalton said.

“You open the doors,” Skye said. “Then follow me through. Get your seeming back up as fast as you can.”

The museum came into view up ahead. It looked like a squat, simplified castle, with crenellated battlements and two modest turrets. The extra-large front doors were composed of dark wood studded with iron. Nobody was coming in or out of the building, and the surrounding trees helped seclude it from other structures.

Anxiety gnawed at Cole as the doors drew near. What would they do if an alarm was raised? He supposed they would have to take out the guard before he could give them away. That must be why Skye wanted to go first.

Dalton rushed ahead, put a hand on the door, then paused. “It opens inward,” he said.

Skye gave a nod. “All of you follow me.” She pushed open the door and slipped inside. Simultaneously, from deeper in the building, Cole heard a low rumble. He made it through the door in time to see a blazing ball of fire the size of a tumbleweed bouncing from wall to wall down one of the hallways, shedding dark billows of smoke.

Skye’s seeming went down for less than a second, then came back up. Jace’s was restored quickly as well, so Cole assumed the same was true for himself. As soon as Dalton had his seeming back in place, the fireball vanished, leaving behind no smoke or damage.

In her Leona persona, Skye briskly walked toward the guard. “Why were your eyes down that hall?”

Flustered, he started to stammer. “Yes, well, there was a noise, and, um—”

“That was an illusion I made from the doorway,” Skye said. “What if we were enemies trying to distract you? You would have an arrow in you by now.”

“I’m sorry, Leona,” he said.

“Sorry enough to protect this museum more effectively?” Skye asked. “Every guard is posted on these grounds for a reason.”

“Lesson learned,” the guard said. “I’ll take greater care. Again, I apologize.”

“Very well,” Skye said. “I’ll keep this between us for now. Don’t be surprised if I test you again.”

“Understood.” The guard looked sheepishly at Cole and the others.

Dalton led the way forward. When they entered the next room, various suits of armor began fighting each other. At first Cole froze, then he realized it was part of the exhibit.

Dalton continued across the room, then through an art gallery with moving paintings and writhing sculptures. They turned down a hall, and Dalton stepped through a large painting of an island lagoon with a ship in the background.

When Cole followed him through, he found himself at the top of a musty, cramped stairway. They descended to a gloomy hall lined with doors. Dalton walked through one of the last doors on the left, then waited for the others to catch up.

They stood together in a small, cluttered office. “Okay,” Dalton said. “Through here we’ll come to a normal door. That’s the one with the weak scrubber. Just past it is a metal door with a guard, then another metal door. After a long walk, we’ll come out of a crypt in the Merriston Cemetery. The crypt door opens from the inside, but it’s always locked from the outside. The guys prop it open for the return trip.”

“Not necessary,” Skye said. “We won’t be returning.”

Dalton slid a desk aside and crouched down to pass through the wall behind it. Using his hands to probe the dimensions of the opening, Cole found that the concealed gap was low and narrow. He ducked through.

Single candles spaced along the walls lit the grimy passage. Dalton led them forward. There was only room to walk single file. Cole noticed that none of the candles dripped any wax. They were all the exact same length. They had to be seemings.

Dalton reached a wooden door and paused, looking back at Skye. “Don’t you want to go first?” he whispered.

“That’s right,” Skye said. “I should be in front to talk to the guard.”

Dalton leaned against the wall, and Skye squeezed by him. She opened the door and stepped through. Beyond the doorway, Cole saw a guard watching from behind a door made of iron bars. Skye’s seeming didn’t flicker. When Dalton stepped through, he grunted softly, but his fake persona held as well. Cole went next, followed by Jace, who closed the door.

“Leona?” the guard asked.

“We’re heading out,” Skye said.

From above and behind, bells started wildly clanging. The flames of the candles on the wall turned red. Cole tried not to react, but he knew the ruckus must be for them. Leona had awakened or had been found.

“Uh-oh,” the guard said from beyond the door of bars. “That’s the general alarm. Nobody in or out until we get the all clear.”

“But we have to go out,” Skye said calmly. “We’re searching for an escaped slave. He may have sensitive information.”

“That could be,” the guard said. “But my orders come from the top. A lockdown is the surest way to keep anybody from escaping. I need an all clear before anyone passes.”

The wooden door behind them opened, and Cole’s heart leaped when Gustus came through. The chameleon-eyed man looked taken aback. “What is this? Leona, I sent you ahead!”

“General alarm, sir,” the guard said. “This passage is closed. Nobody has come through here in the last couple of hours.”

“Well done,” Gustus said. “But we need to quietly make an exception. We have strong reason to believe an escaped slave is already outside our perimeter. We’re going out to bring him in. There isn’t time to wait. Every moment counts. Open the way on my authority.”

“You’re in charge, sir,” the guard said, opening the door. Skye moved ahead, and the guard walked with her to a solid iron door, which he opened with a key. Cole passed the guard in silence.

Behind Cole, Gustus paused beside the guard. “Though necessary on occasion, bending protocol like this sets a bad precedent,” Gustus said. “Don’t speak of it to anyone.”

“Understood, sir.”

“And don’t let anyone else through. As far as I’m concerned, this never happened. I’ll never admit to it.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Excellent. Keep a sharp watch.”

They continued down the hall with Gustus at the rear. After finally turning a corner, Skye collapsed against a wall, panting. Her seeming vanished, as did Jace’s. Gustus disappeared. Skye was bathed in sweat.

“You improvised that?” Dalton asked in astonishment. “You held together an unanchored seeming through a scrubber?”

“That was heavy lifting,” Skye said, her eyes closed. “I almost lost my hold on everything at the end there.”

“I don’t know if any of the enchanters here could have done that,” Dalton said. “Maybe the head enchanter on a good day. You even made it look like the door opened.”

“The guard needed to see Gustus come through the scrubber,” Skye said. “It put his authenticity beyond question.”

“I can’t believe we made it,” Dalton said.

“We’re not in the clear yet,” Skye said, pushing away from the wall. “They’ve raised the alarm. They won’t want us to get away.” She started walking. “Come on!”



## CHAPTER

# 20

## HIDEOUT

**T**hey exited the crypt without difficulty. Full of weathered tombs and diverse monuments, the cemetery looked more like a forgotten statue garden than a graveyard. With the bells of the Silver Lining still clamoring in the distance, Skye cloaked them in seemings, this time grubby people in worn clothing.

“I can do myself,” Dalton offered.

“I’ve got it,” Skye said. “Without the scrubbers to interfere, I’d like to think I could handle four temporary seemings from my deathbed.”

“Where to now?” Cole asked.

“I did some scouting this morning,” Skye said. “One of my old hideouts was untouched. Nobody has used it in years. We’ll go there. Until we arrive, let’s spread out. They’ll be looking for a group.”

Jace hung back, and Cole strolled off to one side. Dalton stayed near Skye, and Cole resisted the temptation to join them. He could wait a little longer to hear everything that had happened to his friend since they last saw each other. The first priority was to avoid getting caught.

There weren’t many other people in the cemetery. A few old folks stood contemplatively beside graves. One elderly woman shuffled along a lane using a cane. Cole wondered why he only saw older people. Was it because they

didn't have to work? Maybe they had more close friends and relatives who had passed away. Or maybe it was just coincidence.

Skye and Dalton exited the cemetery through a small gate. Cole doubted it could be the main entrance. He followed them through the gate and along a walking path. Glancing back, he saw Jace trailing well behind.

As they continued into the city, Cole walked on the opposite side of the street from Skye. Jace continued to hang back. With each block they traveled, Cole felt himself unwind a little more. It looked like they had made a clean getaway.

Up ahead, Skye and Dalton stopped at a street corner. After a glance from Skye, Cole realized she was waiting for him. He crossed the street and joined them. A few moments later Jace caught up.

"We're almost there," Skye said. "I don't think we're being followed. Stay with me."

She proceeded along the street, then turned down a shadowy alley. After going a short ways, Cole could see that it was a dead end. A large black dog lay in the corner near the far wall of the alley. As Skye approached, the dog raised its head and growled. She kept coming, and the dog growled more intensely, showing teeth.

"Skye?" Cole asked uncertainly.

"Trust me," she said, stepping through the dog. Reaching up high, her hand disappeared into the wall and came out with a key. After feeling lower along the wall, her hand sinking a couple of inches into the bricks, she inserted the key and pulled open a door that had been masked by illusion.

"The dog looks good," Dalton said, walking through it.

"A friend made it," Skye said. "It's permanent. You can't open the door without disrupting it, and I can tell if it has been disrupted by anyone besides me. Nobody has bothered it."

"Who would mess with a growling dog?" Jace asked.

"Especially in an alley with no entrances to homes or businesses," Skye said.

"The shadows?" Dalton asked.

“Good eye,” Skye said. “I layered some false, permanent shadows, so you can’t see the back of the alley from the front. That way we’re sure to go in and out unnoticed.”

They passed through the doorway and into a long, narrow corridor without doors or windows. Skye produced a ball of light that she held in her hand. Halfway down the hall she stopped.

“There’s a ladder built into the wall, buried under a seeming,” she explained. “Climb to the top, then make yourselves at home.”

Cole reached out for the plaster wall, and his hands sunk into it and found rungs. He climbed up, passing through the fake ceiling and eventually entering a spacious room lit by a variety of lamps. The comfortable furnishings included a low table, two sofas, and a couple of cushy armchairs. Art hung on the walls, and carpets covered much of the wooden floor.

Skye came up the ladder last. “Have a seat, everyone,” she said. “It’s time to meet our new friend.” The seemings masking their identities melted away. They all looked like themselves again. Just seeing Dalton again made Cole grin.

“Thanks for rescuing me,” Dalton said, a little uncomfortable.

“Thank Cole for that,” Jace said, plopping down on one of the sofas. “Now we’re just hoping you know something useful.”

They all sat down.

Cole knew the first question he wanted to ask. “Have you heard anything about Jenna?”

Dalton shook his head sadly. “She came with us to Junction City. I haven’t seen her since I was split into the group headed for Elloweer. I don’t know what group she ended up with. But she was okay the last time I saw her. They treat the slaves pretty well—the ones who can shape, anyway.”

“Any local news?” Jace asked.

“I’ve been working at the Silver Lining,” Dalton said. “I’ve heard all sorts of things. What do you want to know?”

“We’re wondering about a secret prisoner at Blackmont Castle,” Skye said.

“Wow,” Dalton said. “You guys don’t mess around. That’s a big deal. Hardly anybody talks about it. Nobody knows who it is.”

“Are there any rumors about her?” Cole asked.

“It’s a she?” Dalton asked back.

“We think so,” Cole said. “Have you heard something different?”

“I have no idea,” Dalton said. “I’ve never directly overheard anybody mention the prisoner. It’s still a well-guarded secret. I’ve picked up a little gossip from the other slaves. Nothing specific. As a group, we hear a lot. Do you think it’s somebody you know?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “What do you know about the High Shaper’s daughters?”

“Is that a good topic?” Jace asked.

“We can trust Dalton,” Cole said. “He’s with us now. He needs to get up to speed.”

“I just became a fugitive,” Dalton told Jace. “That was blind faith in my best friend. Lots of people will want to find me. I’m marked as a slave. I’m doomed without you guys. I’m on your side, man. The more I know, the more I can help.”

“Have you heard about the High King’s daughters?” Cole asked.

“Not much,” Dalton said. “They all died a long time ago, right? He has no heirs.”

“He faked their deaths in order to steal their shaping powers,” Cole said. “Taking their powers stopped them from aging.”

“What?” Dalton said in surprise. “Where did you hear that?”

“I know one of his daughters,” Cole said. “And we think another one of them is the secret prisoner at Blackmont Castle.”

Cole went on to explain about meeting Mira and fighting Carnag to get her powers back. He told about shapecrafters and how the High King was planning to do shapecraft experiments on the gifted slaves he had bought from Ansel.

“He can shape the shaping power?” Dalton asked incredulously.

“If he can’t, he has people who can,” Cole said. “Carnag is proof. We met one of the shapecrafters. The High King only wanted you and the others he bought to develop your powers so he could mess with them.”

“Does he want to steal them?” Dalton asked.

“We don’t know,” Cole said. “Maybe. The shapecrafter lady wouldn’t spill the details.”

“Where is Mira now?” Dalton asked.

Cole explained about losing Mira to the Rogue Knight. He told how Joe and Twitch went after her.

“And you think the big threat to the northwest is really Honor’s power?” Dalton verified.

“That’s our best guess,” Cole said.

Skye leaned forward. “It fits so well that if we can’t identify the prisoner, we’ll proceed as if it’s Honor.”

“And do what?” Dalton asked.

“Free her,” Skye replied.

Dalton whistled and shook his head. “Good luck.” He looked at Cole. “You’ve gotten mixed up in some crazy stuff.”

Cole gave a little shrug. “After I met Mira and we escaped together, it just sort of happened. It was thanks to her contacts that I found Jill Davis, who led me to you.”

“You saw Jill?” Dalton asked.

“She’s in Carthage,” Cole replied. “She wouldn’t come with me. She was too scared.”

“I see why,” Dalton said. “If you guys are going to Blackmont Castle, you’re looking for trouble. It’s the strongest prison in Elloweer.”

“I know,” Skye said. “I grew up here.”

“We’re talking about their most closely guarded prisoner,” Dalton emphasized. “Nobody has even seen this person.”

“Somebody has seen her,” Skye said.

“Somebody who knows how to keep a secret,” Dalton said. “The Dreadknight is champion of Edgemont. He watches over Blackmont Castle personally.”

“The Dreadknight?” Cole asked.

“The most feared champion in Elloweer,” Dalton said. “Nobody knows his real name. He’s been unchallenged for almost twenty years.”

“All true,” Skye said. “But we can’t let any of that stop us. The High King is losing the powers he stole. People would rally around his slighted heirs. With the help of his daughters, we can finally overthrow him and restore our old freedoms. But first we must free Honor and help her get her powers back. Until we do, the monster in the north will keep rampaging.”

“What do you know about the monster?” Jace asked.

Dalton shrugged. “It’s becoming a cause for real panic. The monster seems to be heading this way. Towns and cities are emptying as it gets closer. Anyone who doesn’t run away disappears. But you guys should know more about it than I do.”

“Why?” Skye asked.

“You know,” Dalton said. “The soldier.”

“What soldier?” Skye asked.

“The guardsman from Pillocks who saw the monster,” Dalton said as if relaying common knowledge.

“I haven’t heard about this,” Skye said.

“Aren’t you part of the Unseen?” Dalton asked.

“Yes, but I haven’t been in touch with my contacts for several days,” she said.

“Sorry, I figured you knew,” Dalton said. “There was a guardsman who saw the monster and got away. As far as I know, he’s the only person who ever came close and then escaped. I’m not sure what exactly he saw, but apparently some of the champions and aldermen were worried his stories could cause panic. They sent him to Blackmont Castle.”

“Is that where they put *everyone*?” Jace asked.

“Only the most important prisoners,” Dalton said. “The ones they don’t execute. Anyhow, some members of the resistance intercepted the soldier on his way to Edgemont and freed him. Rustin Sage and Alderman Campos were furious. Nobody knows where he ended up.”

“When did this happen?” Skye asked. “Recently?”

“Just barely,” Dalton said. “Like a couple days ago.”

Skye stood up. “This has been useful. You’re a very attentive young man.”

“Thanks,” Dalton said.

Cole couldn't believe how much Dalton already seemed to know about life in Elloweer. Then again, Cole figured it would surprise others to find out how much *he* had learned about the Outskirts in the short time he'd been here. It shouldn't be a shocker—Dalton worked in a confidence lounge where people traded secrets every day, and he had a good brain. Stuck in another world, he had kept his ears open.

“You three will be safe here,” Skye said as she moved toward the exit. “I know just who to contact to find out more about the guardsman. This could be a crucial lead. The more we know about the form Honor's power has taken, the better chance we'll have to help her regain her abilities.”

“What should we do?” Cole asked.

“Sit tight,” Skye said. “I'll return soon.”

## CHAPTER

# 21

## MORGASSA

“**T**his is kind of like talking to a dead guy,” Dalton said. “I already mourned for you. I figured I’d lost you just like everything else. Even if you had survived, I knew the chances of seeing you again were basically zero.”

Dalton and Cole sat together on one of the sofas. Jace slept on the other sofa, face against the cushions. Skye still hadn’t returned.

“I could have died,” Cole said. “The sky castles almost got me. And I thought we were goners when we fought Carnag.”

“I can’t believe the adventures you’ve had,” Dalton said. “Sambria sounds crazy! I thought I had it bad, but compared to you, my life has been calm. Since getting sorted at Junction City, I’ve worked at the Silver Lining and practiced making seemings. Part of me still can’t believe you found me.”

“I told you I’d come,” Cole reminded him.

“I know,” Dalton said. “I believed you’d try. It just seemed impossible. Even so, a little piece of me thought you might show up one day. I swore to myself that if you found me, I’d run off. That’s part of the reason I kept track of the secret passages.”

“You haven’t heard about Jenna since Junction City?” Cole asked.

“I’ve hardly seen anybody from home since then,” Dalton said. “I don’t know where they sorted her. I’ve only seen the four other kids they sent to



Elloweer—and it's been weeks since we split up. None of the others are here in Merriston.”

“I saw Jill Davis in Carthage,” Cole said. “She told me how to find you.”

“Really?” Dalton asked. “How is she?”

“Alive,” Cole said. “Kind of like you—doing her job as a slave in a confidence lounge. She didn't want me to try to rescue her. She was scared the resistance couldn't protect her.”

“She might be right,” Dalton said. “She's probably safer where she is.”

“Do you wish I hadn't come for you?” Cole asked.

“No way,” Dalton replied with enthusiasm. “Jill might be safer working at the confidence lounge, but that doesn't mean she's better off. There's more to life than safety. It was risky for me to leave, but if I didn't want to do it, I wouldn't have come. Besides, what was the alternative? Stay here as a slave the rest of my life?”

“I don't know,” Cole said heavily. “I've gotten you into trouble before. Look . . . I'm sorry I brought us to the haunted house. I'm sorry I wanted to see the basement. When we were going down the stairs, you heard them lock the door. You tried to warn me. I should have listened.”

“Not your fault,” Dalton said. “It was dumb to go into a stranger's basement, but you weren't the only one who volunteered. I was curious too. We should have known something was off just because they *had* a basement.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked.

“Who in our neighborhood had a basement?” Dalton asked. “You didn't. I didn't. Do you know anybody who did?”

“I never thought about that,” Cole said. “We used to have a basement when we lived in Boise.”

“Not that basements are evil,” Dalton said. “Just out of the ordinary in Mesa. I noticed the weirdness of having a basement, and I knew it was dumb to go into a stranger's house, but there were lots of kids, so I figured nothing bad could happen. By the time I heard the door lock, it was too late. Once we went down the stairs, we were sunk. If we had gone back up to try the door, they probably would have just sprung the trap earlier.”

“Maybe,” Cole said. “But going to the spook alley was my idea. I convinced you. Jenna, too.”

“She went with a bunch of her friends,” Dalton said. “She might have gone whether or not you invited her. Don’t worry—she’s probably got a cushy job. She can shape. They’ll treat her well.”

“Until they start experimenting on her,” Cole said. “Quima, the shapecrafter lady, made it sound like they had more in store for you guys than just stripping your powers away. But she was pretty bitter about us wrecking her plans. She might have just been trying to scare me.”

“I can’t believe we’re part of a revolution,” Dalton said. “The High Shaper is really powerful. The resistance will need a lot of support to take him down.”

“They’ll get it once everyone finds out about Mira and her sisters,” Cole said. “If we can overthrow the High King, we’ll also free the slaves. That includes you and all our friends.”

“Even if the revolution works, we may not get to go home. If a Wayminder sends us to Arizona, we’ll get drawn back into the Outskirts. Plus, nobody back home will remember us. Our families will look at us like strangers.”

“That’s what I heard too,” Cole said. “It could be a sneaky way to keep people from trying to leave.”

“You think they’re lying?”

“I don’t know. Mira seems to think that’s how it works too. True or not, there has to be a way around it. We’ll talk to the best Wayminders. We’ll find their Grand Shaper. Shapecraft might even help us. If it can mess with the shaping power, maybe we can use it to get home and stay there.”

Dalton shook his head. “That would be amazing,” he said. “I guess I kind of gave up hope that could ever happen. Home felt so far away. But now, seeing you, it seems possible again.” Cole knew exactly what he meant. It was hard after being back with Dalton not to focus one hundred percent on finding the others from his world and escaping. But Mira had been there for him over and over—he couldn’t just walk away while the Rogue Knight held her captive. Besides, without Mira’s help and connections, who knew how far

he and Dalton would get? No Mira would have meant no Skye and no Joe. Without them, Cole still wouldn't know where to look for Dalton, let alone how to rescue him.

"This place could be worse, at least," Dalton said. "Not that I want to stay," he added hurriedly. "But it's cool to make seemings. Much cooler than anything I did back home."

"Fun for you since you're a wizard," Cole said.

"You brought that Jumping Sword to life," Dalton said. "That isn't supposed to happen. You've got power too."

"I don't know," Cole said. "That one burst of power is all I've ever done. I can't make it happen again. Declan, the Grand Shaper of Sambria, thought I'd have abilities someday. I figured when things changed, I'd know. How was it for you? Did it come all at once?"

"It's hard to explain," Dalton said. "I never made a seeming until they started training me. My power works like active imagining. You know how you can picture stuff in your head?"

"Like a hamburger?" Cole asked. "I miss hamburgers."

A big, juicy burger appeared on the coffee table, ketchup and molten cheese oozing out from under the top bun. It looked completely tangible. Cole could almost taste it.

"That's just mean," Cole said.

The cheeseburger vanished.

"They had me picture stuff in my mind," Dalton said. "They pushed me to see it really vividly, all the little details. Then I was supposed to picture it outside of my mind."

"And it just worked?" Cole asked.

"Not at first," Dalton said. "But I would get little flickers, so they knew I had potential. You have to picture it just right, and push a certain way, like flexing a muscle in your mind. It takes a lot of concentration. After you make the seeming, you have to keep concentrating, or it goes away. Unless you make it permanent, which I haven't even begun to figure out yet."

Cole pictured a break-dancing toddler. He imagined the little guy spinning on his back, doing the worm, whirling on his head. The toddler wore only a

diaper. Cole felt like he could see him clearly. But he didn't know where to begin to make the little guy appear on the coffee table.

"I'm trying to do it," Cole said. "Where do you push from?"

"It's hard to explain," Dalton said. "Think of it like you're trying to make yourself actually see it with your eyes. That's how I started. Then when it works a little, you begin to learn how you really need to push. After you figure out how to push, it takes practice to build up the strength to push harder. I doubt I'll ever be able to push like Skye."

"You haven't been here very long," Cole said. "You'll keep getting better."

"I can't believe how well she did Gustus," Dalton said. "It's hard to make a human illusion move right unless you anchor it to a person. If you tie it to a person, the seeming smiles when the person smiles, walks when the person walks. When you try to do it yourself, stuff moves, but it usually looks wrong. You forget to make them breathe. The joints don't adjust quite right. The feet sink through the floor or float a little. You start to feel like a clumsy puppeteer. Not only was Skye doing three seemings at once, she made a fourth unanchored seeming walk through a scrubber and appear totally natural."

"She's good," Cole said. "You should have seen her dazzle show."

Dalton gave Cole a shy glance. "She's not bad-looking, either."

"I guess," Cole said. "But she's pretty old. Like an aunt or something. Don't tell me you're in love with her."

Dalton looked away. "She's just, you know, really nice and cute and talented."

"This is like Miss Montgomery!" Cole exclaimed. Dalton had harbored a serious crush on their third-grade teacher. "Are you going to write her a poem?"

"That poem wasn't for Miss Montgomery," Dalton said.

"That's right," Cole remembered. "You used her real name. Linda."

"I was just practicing," Dalton professed. "The name was a coincidence."

"Was it a coincidence how you hung around after class with lots of extra questions?"

“Those were legitimate math questions,” Dalton protested.

“Maybe you could get some shaping tutoring from Skye,” Cole suggested.

Dalton huffed and shook his head. “A lady can be pretty without me falling in love with her. You’re right, she’s like an aunt.”

“A pretty aunt,” Cole teased.

“Forget I said anything.”

Cole could tell his friend was really uncomfortable. “Okay. New subject. I guess it’s hard to do voices? You know, when you make a seeming?”

“Sounds are tricky,” Dalton said, seizing the new topic like a life preserver. “I can’t do them yet. Same with smells. They should work the same way as visuals, but most of us find them way harder.”

Refocusing, Cole tried to force his break-dancing toddler into existence. He strained to actually see him instead of just imagine him in his mind. He envisioned details—rustling diapers, wispy curls, pink skin with chubby little folds of baby fat. Nothing materialized.

“Your face is turning red,” Dalton said.

Cole laughed. “I’m not sure seemings are my thing.”

“I’d rather have a Jumping Sword,” Dalton said. “Those sound cool. I wish I could see one.”

“They’re awesome when they work,” Cole said. “Skye stashed them somewhere this morning. She didn’t want them to get confiscated at the Silver Lining, and she didn’t want to leave them at her mom’s place.”

Stretching, Dalton looked around. “If I have to be stuck in the Outskirts, I’m glad you’re with me. I mean, I’m not glad you’re stuck here, but, you know—”

“I get it,” Cole said. “I feel the same way. The thought of you and Jenna out there someplace helped keep me going. I don’t know how I would have been if I was here alone. Less brave, probably.”

Jace rolled over. “*Less* brave? You were already breaking records!”

“I thought you were asleep,” Cole said.

Jace groaned. “How can I sleep with you two babbling nonstop? Tell me more about the food you miss. Is it peanut butter most? Or cereal?”

“You wouldn’t mock it if you’d tried it,” Dalton said.

“Maybe,” Jace said. “What are hamburgers?”

Dalton made a perfect burger appear on the table.

Jace leaned forward. “What’s in the middle? Ground meat?”

“Yep,” Cole said. “Beef.”

“Okay,” Jace admitted. “That looks pretty good.”

Cole heard a noise downstairs. “Is that Skye?”

The burger vanished.

Jace grinned. “Might want to fix your hair a little, Dalton.”

Dalton glared.

“What?” Jace whispered innocently. “Don’t you want to be the favorite nephew?”

Cole heard soft footsteps downstairs. Dalton quickly ran his fingers through his hair.

Jace rolled off the couch, grabbed a heavy lamp, and crept over to where the ladder came up from below. Holding the lamp ready to swing, he put a finger to his lips.

“This is why it’s nice to have Jace around,” Cole whispered.

Skye’s head came up through the fake floor. She was momentarily startled when she saw Jace, then she smiled up at him. “Expecting someone?”

Jace lowered the lamp. “I’m almost disappointed. It’s not every day you get this good of a free shot.”

“I have great news,” Skye said, not coming all the way up. “I know the people who nabbed the guardsman. We get to go meet him right now. Don’t leave anything behind. We may not come back here.”



They wove through the streets of Merriston disguised as unremarkable people. From the quiet basement of a large inn, Skye led them into a maze of underground passages. After navigating a clever assortment of seemings, they reached a heavy wooden door hidden behind an illusionary brick wall.

Dropping her disguise, Skye slapped a palm against the door. “Let us in!”

A peephole slid open to reveal a pair of dark eyes. “Skye! Good to see you! What goes up, must . . .”

“Be higher,” she replied.

“A ringer saved is a ringer . . .”

“That owes you one,” Skye finished.

“Seeing is . . .”

“Deceiving.”

“Word of the day?”

“Lemon.”

The door opened. A tall man with brown skin and a wide smile pulled Skye in for a hug. “You’ve been too unseen lately,” he said. “Who are your friends?”

Skye introduced Cole, Jace, and Dalton. “This is Sultan,” she said. “One of the best.”

“Ben told me to watch for you,” Sultan said. “Come with me.”

They moved through two more doors and into a confusing warren of halls and chambers. Cole got glimpses of people in rooms they passed, men and women eating at a long table, an old guy petting a big dog, a woman with an eye patch studying a map. Some doors were closed.

They reached a muscular man guarding a heavy door. He stepped aside, and Sultan opened it. Inside they found a young, lean man with scruffy whiskers and very short hair. He stood up as they entered. “More visitors?” he asked.

“You told us you want to get your story out,” Sultan said.

“Not one person at a time,” the man said. “This needs to go public. Nobody gets what’s coming. Cities that don’t evacuate only make her stronger. Our leaders need to face the facts.”

Cole wasn’t sure the guy was quite sane. His earnestness and intensity seemed almost fanatical.

“Her?” Skye asked. “The monster is a girl?”

“Her name is Morgassa,” the man said.

“How big?” Skye asked.

“Your size,” he said. “More or less.”

“She’s a woman?” Skye asked.

“She looks like a woman.”

“You saw her?”

“Sure did,” the man said. “And heard her. I saw her horde. They passed by all around me.” He glanced at Sultan. “What’s with the kids?”

“This is Skye,” Sultan said. “She’s one of our top operatives. The kids are in her care. She can help get your message heard.”

“I worked at the Silver Lining,” Dalton said. “There’s no better place in Elloweer to start a rumor.”

“The kids belong here,” Skye said. “I never caught your name.”

“I’m Russell,” the man said. “Look, I don’t mean to be rude, but spreading this message is up to you guys now. I’ve done my part. Sultan already knows all I’ve got to say. He can tell you as well as I can.”

“Humor us,” Sultan said. “I want Skye to hear it from your lips.”

Russell gave an exasperated sigh. “Where do I start? Nobody can stop her. She won’t be here tomorrow, or the day after, but she’s coming this way, and Merriston is a big city. If they don’t get people moving now, it’s going to be pandemonium.”

“Tell your story,” Skye said. “I swear to help share it. How did you see all this and get away? I thought nobody got away?”

Russell chuckled through his nose. “It wasn’t by any skill of mine. One of those Enforcers helped me. The guys in black. The horde was coming. My unit retreated too slowly. We were overrun while trying to help stragglers.”

“How did the Enforcer help you?” Skye asked.

“He turned me to stone,” Russell said. “I became a statue of myself. He told me to wait. Like I had a choice! I stayed conscious. I could see and hear. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Didn’t need to. They were all around me. I watched some of the guys in my unit get taken.”

“How did you see if you were a statue?” Cole asked.

“Ask the Enforcer,” Russell said. “I’m no enchanter. It was a changing, not an illusion. I couldn’t move a bit, but I could still see.”

“You saw men taken?” Skye asked.

“Morgassa isn’t alone,” Russell said. “She travels with all the people she has claimed and with her army of figments.”

“Living seemings?” Skye verified.



“More like blank seemings,” Russell said. “She controls them. They look like people, but kind of blurry, without features. You can see through them a little. They don’t seem to hurry, but they’re fast. They kind of glide. When they reach people, they merge with them, and Morgassa takes control.”

“Her figments merge with people?” Skye asked.

“You’d have to see it to fully get it,” Russell said. “The people she has taken run ahead. They fight anyone who resists. They’re stronger than they should be. They hold people down. Then the figments swoop in and take them over. The same people who were running away start helping her, like they’ve completely lost their minds. They get changed. Each person who gets taken swells her ranks.”

“How many figments?” Cole asked, unsure if he was supposed to be part of the conversation, but unable to help himself.

“A vast horde,” Russell said. “As many as she wants. You can see her making more like it’s nothing. She waves an arm, and twenty spring into being. She waves her other arm, and thirty more appear. She’s already claimed thousands of people. All of them drones. Changelings. There are always more figments. She’s going to control every corner of Elloweer. It won’t take long. She won’t even break a sweat.”

“They didn’t bother you?” Skye asked.

“Not at all,” Russell said. “Her horde flowed around me like I was a rock in a river. They never gave me a second look. They took everybody else. The town was left empty. It was like nobody had ever lived there. Nobody peeked out the windows once the trouble cleared. No one came creeping up from the cellar. The town of Pillocks was dead. A graveyard without bodies. The bodies all left with her.”

“Then what happened?” Skye asked.

“Time passed,” Russell said. “I didn’t get tired standing there. Didn’t get thirsty. I couldn’t move my head or my eyes. But I saw. I heard. I worried I would stay like that forever.”

“How’d you change back?” Cole asked.

“Another Enforcer came. Different guy. I don’t think the one who changed me to stone escaped. The new Enforcer changed me back to

normal.”

“Did he tell you anything?” Skye prompted.

“He asked what I had seen. I told him. He gave me a horse. He told me Morgassa and the horde were heading toward Glinburg. He told me to ride southeast to Ambrage and warn them. I did what he said. I warned them. I told them about Morgassa and the people she controls, and the figments. They sent me on to Westridge to warn the garrison there. I talked to a champion and the alderman. That’s when everyone turned on me. They arrested me. They were scared I’d cause a panic. I told them Elloweer needed a panic. Her horde will just keep growing.”

“It sounds terrible,” Skye said.

“Sister, you have no idea. I can’t do it justice. I’ve never had any use for the resistance. Bunch of wackos still fighting a war that ended decades ago. But it was the resistance who freed me on the way to Blackmont Castle. As a prisoner, I’d repeated my story to some of the higher-ups in the legion and the city governments. How was I thanked? They sent me to Blackmont. They wanted to shut me up. I don’t care what your politics are—Elloweer needs to be warned. There’s no time to plot and scheme. There’s no time to weigh alternatives. All we can do now is try to limit the damage. The people of Elloweer need to get out of the way. If the resistance will spread that message, then they’re the real champions of Elloweer.”

“We’re setting plans in motion,” Sultan said.

“You need more than plans,” Russell stressed. “You guys are called the Unseen? It’s time to be seen. You need riders going back the way I came, telling everyone to leave everything that might slow them down and run. For so many it’s already too late.”

“We’ve already begun,” Sultan said.

“What about you?” Skye asked Russell. “What are you going to do?”

He pressed his fists against his temples. “You mean once my rescuers are satisfied that I’ve told enough people my story? Once they let me, I’m gone. I’m thankful they freed me. I’d hate to be stuck in Blackmont with Morgassa on her way. But I’ve paid them back. I told what I know. I’m handing over

the problem to them. I'm now a fugitive. But I'm not alone. We're all fugitives."

"Welcome to the club," Jace said.

"He means the whole kingdom," Skye said. "Everyone is a fugitive now."

Russell winked. "Most just don't know it yet. I'll be running scared, but not from the champions or the aldermen or the legion. I just want a seeming that makes me unrecognizable, and then I'm leaving Elloweer for good. Anybody with an ounce of sense will do the same. To stand against Morgassa is to join her. Avoidance is the only defense. She wants Elloweer? Let her have it! Elloweer is over. There's only one champion who matters now. Her followers repeat her name like a mindless prayer. Morgassa."

## CHAPTER

# 22

## CHALLENGE

**T**he black serpent spiraled up the table leg, its body winding and flexing precisely. The head hooked outward and curved onto the top of the table, followed by the rest of its sinuous length. With syrupy grace, the snake flowed across the table toward Cole, who watched with wide eyes as it reared up and bared a pair of slender fangs.

“That looks pretty real,” Cole said.

“Thanks,” Dalton replied.

Suddenly, the snake had the head of a chicken. The body became a slender pink balloon. The chicken head pecked the balloon body, popping it without making a noise.

“A little less real,” Cole said.

The seeming vanished.

Cole and Dalton sat on cots in a small, damp room. A flimsy table, a hammock, and some wooden crates added to the decor. At least they had a door. Some of the rooms in the Unseen hideout were only made private by shabby curtains. They had slept in the cots one night so far. Skye planned to spend one more night there before going to the Bloated Udder to find Joe and Twitch.

“Do you wonder why the Unseen aren’t already running for it?” Dalton asked.

“Maybe they will,” Cole said.

“Sounds like it’s going to get ugly here before long.”

“Things were ugly in Sambria too.”

Dalton folded his arms. “Will Skye want to go after Morgassa?”

“Maybe,” Cole said. “If Morgassa is Honor’s power, finding Honor might be the only chance to beat her.”

Dalton stared at Cole, lips compressed.

“What?” Cole asked.

“Do you ever wonder if staying with Skye might not be the best way to help Jenna? Would we find her faster if we took off and did our own thing?”

“Maybe,” Cole said. “I’ve considered it. But the Rogue Knight has Mira. I can’t just abandon her. She’s great. She’s a real friend.”

“Aren’t those other guys going after her?” Dalton asked.

“Joe and Twitch,” Cole said. “They’re on her trail, but I won’t leave here until I know she’s all right. I wouldn’t leave you either. I’ve thought a lot about this. Aside from everything else, I really think that staying with Mira will be the best way to help Jenna and the others. Don’t get me wrong. I hear about Morgassa, and I want to run.”

Dalton nodded. “It might not be a bad time to search in other kingdoms for a while.”

“I hear you,” Cole acknowledged. “But with Mira, we get help from the resistance wherever we go. And if Mira can defeat her father, we might free everybody. I don’t think that happens without her help.”

“We also might get caught breaking into Blackmont,” Dalton pointed out. “Or we might get killed by some horrible monster.”

“I didn’t say it was safe,” Cole said. “But if we want to help Jenna, staying with Mira beats wandering blindly without any help. Don’t forget, sticking with Mira led me to the people who helped me find you.”

The door opened without warning. Jace burst in, his eyes bright with excitement. “Have you guys heard the news?”

“I don’t think so,” Cole said.

“The Rogue Knight challenged the Dreadknight to a duel,” Jace said. “The Dreadknight accepted. They fight tomorrow for control of Edgemont.”

“Whoa,” Cole said. “Seriously?”

“Everybody is talking about it,” Jace said. “I guess word is out all over town. Only residents of Edgemont are supposed to attend the fight.”

“Have you talked to Skye?” Dalton asked.

“I can’t find her,” Jace said. “She must have gone out to follow up on the news. You get what this probably means.”

“The Rogue Knight learned about Honor from Mira,” Cole said. “Do you think she told him on purpose?”

“Maybe,” Jace said. “She may have decided the Rogue Knight was the perfect tool to bust into Blackmont Castle. Or maybe the Rogue Knight pried the information from her and wants to add another princess to his collection. Either way, there’s a good chance Mira will be at the duel.”

“There’s also a good chance it’s a trap,” Dalton said.

“What do you mean?” Jace asked.

“Rustin Sage wants the Rogue Knight out of the picture,” Dalton said. “But he doesn’t want to risk his championship. If Rustin knows where the Rogue Knight will be tomorrow, it would be a golden opportunity.”

“We have to be there,” Cole said. “It’ll be our best chance to help Mira.”

“Let’s hope Skye is working on it,” Jace said.



Skye returned later in the afternoon. She came to Cole’s room with Sultan. The boys had been playing a dice game Jace had taught them to pass the time.

“You heard the news about the duel tomorrow at dawn?” she checked.

“We’re going, right?” Jace asked.

“Sultan will help us,” Skye said. “It’ll be complicated. We have information from contacts within the Merriston guardsmen.”

“Rustin Sage plans to surround Edgemont tomorrow during the duel,” Sultan said. “He’ll let them fight it out, because if anybody can beat the Rogue Knight, it’s the Dreadknight. If the Rogue Knight loses, problem

solved. If the Rogue Knight wins, Rustin Sage and his knights will descend with his guardsmen and a battalion of legionnaires.”

“Isn’t that against the rules?” Cole asked.

“They have an excuse,” Sultan said. “Because of his robberies, they’ve labeled the Rogue Knight a criminal. They’ll deny him his rights as a champion and take him by force. The governor is backing the plan, along with Alderman Campos.”

“We have to be there,” Skye said. “If the Rogue Knight loses, we’ll rescue Mira and get away. If the Rogue Knight wins, there may be a window of opportunity to free Honor. Should the Dreadknight fall, the Rogue Knight will temporarily be master of Blackmont Castle.”

“Until the Merriston guardsmen and the legionnaires take him out,” Dalton said.

“It’ll be dangerous, but I’m not sure we’ll ever have a better chance,” Skye said. “Get some rest. We’ll leave in the night. I want to arrive well before dawn.”



By the time the first hints of sunrise began lightening the sky, Cole sat huddled beneath a blanket at the Edgemont Arena. Many people had already claimed seats on the tiered benches surrounding the battleground. Skye and Sultan had disguised themselves and the three boys as an actual family who lived in Edgemont. Sympathetic to the rebellion, the family had agreed to skip the fight.

When Cole and the others had reached the arena, officials had taken down their names and the father’s occupation, then quizzed them about where they lived. Sultan had given all the right answers, and they were admitted to the event without trouble.

Cole wore his Jumping Sword. Jace had Mira’s. Dalton brought a knife. Sultan and Skye were armed as well. The illusionists had hidden the weapons with seemings.

The early morning was cold enough that Cole could see his breath. He held his blanket close around him and kept watch for Mira.

Because time had been short, they hadn't attempted to rendezvous with Joe and Twitch. Skye had guessed that Joe would show up at the fight. So far Cole hadn't noticed them in the crowd.

Color slowly bled into the sky. The walls of Blackmont Castle loomed high above the arena, with sharp, angular towers soaring even higher. Harsh and jagged, the entire castle appeared to be composed of dark iron, though Cole assumed at least some of that had to be an illusion.

As dawn approached, spectators crammed into the arena. Cole became pressed shoulder to shoulder with Dalton and Jace as people sandwiched themselves onto their bench. Latecomers stood on the stairs and wherever they could find a spot.

With the sun about to rise, the Rogue Knight strode out onto the arena floor, his bright armor impeccable. He drew Verity and saluted the audience. Most cheered him, though some booed loudly. Eight knights came after him, and lastly the little Halfknight, who received some jeers.

The knights formed up at one side of the arena. Directly above them, in the first row of the stands, Cole saw Mira. She wore a scarlet cloak and looked unharmed.

"Do you see her?" Cole asked Jace.

"Where?"

"Just above the knights," Cole said.

"You're right!" Jace exclaimed. "She looks . . . well."

Cole thought Jace had stopped himself from saying "pretty" or "beautiful." She did look very nice. Cole was too relieved by her presence to tease him.

Jace spread the word to Skye, who nodded as he pointed toward Mira. Cole explained to Dalton where she was. The scarlet cloak helped him find her.

"She doesn't look like a prisoner," Cole observed.

"No," Skye agreed. "But looks can be deceiving."

A hush fell over the arena as the Dreadknight emerged from the far side. His dark armor matched the jagged appearance of Blackmont Castle. Spikes bristled on his helmet and his broad shoulders. Cruel edges protruded from his vambraces and greaves. The Rogue Knight was an imposing figure, but the



Dreadknight stood at least a full head taller. He carried a broadsword nearly the height of a man. The blade looked thick enough to chop down a tree.

The Dreadknight's twelve other knights came out and lined up behind their master. None looked nearly as fearsome.

Sheathing his blade, the Rogue Knight went to the center of the battleground to await his opponent. The Dreadknight held his oversize weapon in one hand. Cole suspected most men using two hands would have to drag the broadsword along behind them.

Flames spewed out from within the Dreadknight's helm, causing many in the audience to flinch and gasp. Inky smoke unfurled into the air above him.

"Is this for real?" Dalton asked, shaking his head.

Cole looked at him, relieved to finally have someone else with him who understood just how crazy all these experiences were. "It's like the jousts at the Renaissance festival," Cole said. "Except this might be a little more intense."

The Rogue Knight drew his sword again. "No need to wallow in theatricality," he cried, swishing Verity through the air. The flames and smoke disappeared, some of the spikes vanished from the armor, and the Dreadknight shrank a little, though he was still half a head taller than the Rogue Knight. His sword remained enormous.

The Dreadknight halted about ten paces from the Rogue Knight. "You dare to challenge me for control of Edgemont?" the Dreadknight asked, his voice a roaring bass.

"I would prefer if you stepped down voluntarily," the Rogue Knight replied. "I respect your many years of service as champion here. I admire your prowess in combat. You are past your prime. There is no need for you to perish today. Why not retire and enjoy the fruit of your labors?"

"For that insult I will end you slowly," the Dreadknight thundered.

"Forgive me if I end slower than you expect," the Rogue Knight replied. "Shall we?"

The Dreadknight lumbered forward, sword raised in two hands, and brought it down as if swinging a sledgehammer. The Rogue Knight sidestepped the swipe and sprang forward to counterattack, but the

Dreadknight's blade had not gone into the ground as had seemed inevitable from the force of the swing. The Dreadknight halted the fall of his broadsword and whipped it sideways, bashing the Rogue Knight in the side and flinging him to the dirt.

Cole bit his lip almost hard enough to draw blood. If they wanted access to Blackmont Castle, they needed the Rogue Knight to win! Otherwise, they would be forced to take Mira and run.

The blow had crumpled the side of the Rogue Knight's armor. Blood wasn't apparent, but the brutal impact could have broken his spine.

The Dreadknight advanced on his fallen opponent. From his back, the Rogue Knight deflected a brutal downswing. Still supine, the Rogue Knight kicked at the Dreadknight with both legs. The larger knight spun away from the kick, reversed his grip on the broadsword, and stabbed the point at the Rogue Knight's head.

Cole almost looked away as the tip of the giant blade scraped against the helmet and plunged into the dirt. The Rogue Knight had jerked sideways just enough for the sword to strike a glancing blow. Rolling away, the Rogue Knight scrambled to his hands and knees. The Dreadknight savagely kicked him in the side. Verity flew free as the Rogue Knight went sprawling.

Weaponless and wobbly, the Rogue Knight rose to a kneeling position while the Dreadknight readied his broadsword for a home run swing to the back of his opponent's neck. Unsure whether the Rogue Knight would even see the blow coming, Cole winced as the huge blade hissed toward the fatal strike, but the Rogue Knight ducked it, losing one of his antlers rather than his head. He then lunged at the Dreadknight's legs, wrapping them with both arms like a veteran linebacker. The Dreadknight went down hard, landing flat on his back.

Armor scored and deformed, helmet asymmetrical with the single antler, the Rogue Knight staggered to his feet and retrieved Verity. Sword in hand, he turned to face the Dreadknight as the larger combatant used his broadsword like a crutch to stand up.

"I want you to know," the Rogue Knight said, "you've given me a better fight than any champion I've faced."

Back on his feet, the Dreadknight took a firm stance and held up his sword. “You have heart,” the Dreadknight said. “I’ll grant you that much.”

Sword down at his side, the Rogue Knight walked toward the Dreadknight with a measured tread. “I will spare you if you join me. I seldom make this offer. Be one of my knights. Help me right the wrongs in Elloweer.”

Roaring, the Dreadknight charged forward. Entirely on the defensive, the Rogue Knight deflected one mighty swipe, then another, and another. The Dreadknight attacked relentlessly—forehand, backhand, forehand, backhand. Though the Rogue Knight managed to knock the swings astray, he had no time for a counterattack before the next one came his way. The Dreadknight tirelessly pressed his opponent back. Each ringing collision of blades made Cole wonder how either man kept hold of his weapon.

After getting backed up to the wall of the battleground, the Rogue Knight changed his grip, keeping one hand on Verity’s hilt, but moving his palm to the flat of the blade. Instead of deflecting the next blow, the Rogue Knight stopped it cold. For a moment, the two knights stood frozen, locked in a contest of strength. Then the Dreadknight tried a kick. The Rogue Knight dropped his sword and caught the leg with both hands.

Cole leaned forward to the edge of his seat. The new situation caused a pause in the combat. The Rogue Knight lacked his weapon, but he had his opponent in a tricky position.

“Balance is important when wearing armor,” the Rogue Knight said, holding the leg and walking the Dreadknight backward. The hulking knight hopped on one foot to keep from falling. “Try to swing at me.”

As the Dreadknight pulled back his arm to swing, the Rogue Knight twisted his leg so that the larger knight was at the very edge of toppling. The Dreadknight had to hop wildly to stay up and couldn’t bring his sword to bear.

“This is over,” the Rogue Knight said. “One last chance. Join me, and our enmity is forgotten.”

“You’ve lost your sword.”

“You’ve lost the fight.”

“We’re even at best.”

“Very well. I warned you.”

Cole thought the Rogue Knight would use his hold of the Dreadknight’s leg to push him over backward. Instead, the Rogue Knight shifted his grip, heaved the Dreadknight into the air, and body slammed him. As one, the audience gasped in shock and amazement.

The Rogue Knight picked up the Dreadknight’s broadsword, turned it so it was tip down, raised it high with two hands, and plunged it between the helmet and the top of the breastplate. The Dreadknight lay still as the Rogue Knight stalked over to retrieve Verity. The Dreadknight’s broadsword protruded from the fallen champion like a gravestone.

## CHAPTER

# 23

## PRISONER

The audience watched in stunned silence as the Rogue Knight crouched and picked up his sword. With a flourish, he raised Verity high, and the assemblage burst into applause.

Cole was on his feet. Everyone else had risen as well.

“No way!” Jace yelled in amazement. “That didn’t just happen! Did you see that?”

Cole had seen. The Dreadknight had lost in a big way.

Moving to the center of the arena floor, the Rogue Knight absorbed the adulation for a long moment before sheathing his blade and raising his hands to calm the cheering. The crowd began to quiet down and sit.

The Dreadknight’s twelve knights gathered around his still body. They withdrew the huge sword from him and removed his helmet. The arena became silent. Because of the distance and those huddled around him, Cole couldn’t see the Dreadknight well, but he could tell that he had gray hair. With the tension of the fight over, it hit Cole that he’d just watched a man die. This wasn’t some action movie—it had really happened, right in front of him. He glanced quickly at Dalton and saw that his friend looked ill.

“Now he’s the Deadknight,” Jace murmured.

The Rogue Knight raised a hand to speak. “Knights of the Dreadknight,” he called. “Do you confirm that I have won this challenge?”

One of the knights took off his own helm. He had longish brown hair and a trimmed beard. “I am Desmond Engle, first knight of the knights of Edgemont. The Dreadknight has fallen. You are the new champion of Edgemont, Rogue Knight. Have you a name?”

“The people have bestowed on me the title ‘Rogue Knight,’” he answered. “It suits me for now. The alderman of Edgemont and all who serve under him are hereby relieved of their positions. I would like to meet with the former knights of Edgemont in order to discuss possibilities of continued service. The guardsmen of Edgemont are now under my command, and will defend this city from any outside incursion. Until further notice, there will be no tax burden placed on the people of Edgemont.”

Enthusiastic cheers greeted his final statement. The Rogue Knight waited for the reaction to die down.

“It has not escaped my attention,” the Rogue Knight continued, “that during the night, guardsmen from neighboring cities, principally Merriston, accompanied by a large group of legionnaires, have taken up positions at the outskirts of our city. The coward Rustin Sage wants to arrest me as a criminal rather than face the challenge I made to him more than three fortnights ago. I have won all my championships legally, but when I tried to pressure Rustin to do his duty and fight me, he declared me an outlaw. Rustin Sage seeks to escape justice, and in the process, he threatens to undo our system of government.”

Murmurs percolated through the arena. Some people seemed to support the Rogue Knight. Others grumbled against him.

“If you are not a fighter, I suggest you return to your homes,” the Rogue Knight said. “Knights, guardsmen, and fighting men of Edgemont, I implore you to do your duty and defend Edgemont from any aggressors. Merriston has no authority here. Not even the High King has the right to come here and unseat your champion.”

The crowd reacted with some outrage, but Cole didn’t think it felt like enough. Many people mumbled to one another uncertainly. Some men and

women shook their heads. Several in the crowd began to make their way toward the exits.

“I hope the neighboring cities are bluffing,” the Rogue Knight said. “If they have come in earnest to violate the laws of the land and wrest away my championship, we will resist them. I will now retire to Blackmont Castle with my knights and the Dreadknight’s men to make preparations.”

“Permission to remove the Dreadknight’s remains before we join you at the castle?” Desmond asked.

“Granted,” the Rogue Knight replied. “But I need access to Blackmont.”

“Understood,” Desmond said. “I will send Oster with you to acquaint you with the accommodations and defenses. You fought well today, Rogue Knight. Your victory was duly earned.”

Scattered applause greeted the observation. Most people were now leaving. Cole wondered how much support the Rogue Knight would have against the soldiers who wanted to apprehend him.

The Rogue Knight strode over to his knights. He gestured toward Mira in the stands, and Cole saw her coming down a ladder to join them on the floor of the arena. Her obedience appeared voluntary.

“We have to get down there,” Cole said. “This could be our only chance to join up with them.”

“Right,” Jace agreed. “Come on.”

As a tide of bodies flowed toward the exits, Cole, Jace, Dalton, Skye, and Sultan worked their way toward the arena floor. Mira now stood near the Rogue Knight. Several guardsmen approached him, perhaps seeking orders. Working together, four knights carried the Dreadknight between them. A fifth reverently bore his broadsword.

“Let’s shed our seemings,” Skye announced. “Nobody is going to bother us now. If Mira sees us, she might help us get access.”

The others suddenly looked like themselves, so Cole assumed that he did too. The Rogue Knight and Mira moved toward a door on the arena floor that led under the grandstands. Cole tried to hurry, but the press of people in the overfilled arena made it difficult. He saw Mira scanning the crowd, but

her eyes never settled in his direction. If she left with the Rogue Knight, it would be hard to catch up! The castle would be sealed against intruders.

A flicker of motion off to the side caught Cole's eye. He turned to see a winged figure soaring over the crowd and down toward the arena floor. A couple of knights reached for weapons as the figure landed with a shimmer of insectile wings, but Mira ran to Twitch and waved the knights away.

Turning, Twitch pointed up to the stands. Following his finger, Cole saw Joe making his way down toward Mira. By the time Joe reached the base of the grandstands, Cole and his companions had as well. Mira finally looked Cole's way. Her face lit up when she saw him, and she motioned for him to join her.

Cole found a ladder down to the arena floor. He, Dalton, Jace, Skye, and Sultan caught up to Mira at the same time as Joe. Mira was beaming. "I'm so happy you all found me!" she said. "I was watching for you!"

"Are you all right?" Cole asked, still unsure whether they needed to make a run for it while the crowd continued to pour out of the arena.

Mira glanced toward the Rogue Knight. "Pretty much. At least we have a way into Blackmont Castle."

"You're not a prisoner?" Cole checked.

"I am," Mira said hesitantly. "But the Rogue Knight isn't all bad. We're kind of working together for now. Is that— Are you Dalton?" she asked Dalton.

He smiled back at her. "Yep."

Cole beamed with excitement. "We found him at the confidence lounge, and he's coming with us now, to help us find Honor."

"We can explain everything later," Jace cut in. "Where were you?" he asked Twitch.

"Joe and I couldn't get in for the duel," Twitch explained. "But after people started leaving, nobody checked who entered."

The Rogue Knight approached them. "Mira, we have to go."

"These are my friends," Mira said.

"I remember all but these two," the Rogue Knight said, indicating Sultan and Dalton.



“I’m here to help,” Sultan pledged.

“We could use help,” the Rogue Knight said. “I expect an attack within the hour.” He gestured at Cole. “Some among you have more to them than meets the eye. Mira, you want them with us?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Very well, join us in the castle. There is much to be done.”

Surrounded by knights, Cole exited the arena through a tunnel under the stands. He fell into step beside Mira. “You’re really okay?” he asked quietly.

“I’m better now,” she said. “I was worried I’d never find you guys.”

“Does he know who you are?” Cole whispered, glancing ahead at the Rogue Knight.

“Yeah,” Mira said. “He knew when he took me. I didn’t deny it.”

“What’s he like?” Cole asked.

“Except for kidnapping me, he’s been great. He’s considerate and protective. He’s reasonable and fair. It was my idea to come here.”

“He knows about your sister?” Cole asked.

Mira nodded. “That’s how I convinced him. It’s the main reason we came. He wants to find her too.”

“What if he takes you both captive?”

“It’s a possibility,” Mira said. “Better him than Blackmont Castle. He’s against the High King. We’ll have to play it by ear. I’m so glad you tracked down Dalton!”

Cole turned and motioned Dalton forward. Dalton trotted closer and gave a little wave. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Same,” Mira said. “I’m glad Cole found you. It’s been his top priority.”

Dalton grinned. “Things have gotten more exciting since he showed up.”

“Hold on tight,” Mira replied. “It’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

Cole couldn’t resist smiling. It was weird to see worlds colliding—his best friend in Elloweer talking to his best friend from back home.

They exited the arena and moved up a wide, paved road toward Blackmont Castle. Cole noticed Jace hanging back. He tried to get his attention, but Jace deliberately avoided eye contact.

The Rogue Knight was speaking to the knight Desmond had sent with him. Cole edged forward to hear better.

“. . . most of them don't want anything to do with you,” Oster was saying. “We were approached last night by men speaking for Rustin Sage. In the event of the Dreadknight losing, they promised we would all be reinstated as knights under a new champion if we helped defeat you. The Dreadknight threw them out. He told us that if he fell, we needed to serve the new champion. But most of the knights met with those emissaries privately. You won't see most of them again unless they attack you. I expect similar loyalty from the guardsmen. Desmond will hold true, as will I, which is why he sent me with you. Raul will hold true as well. Probably no others.”

“It's less than I hoped, but more than I expected,” the Rogue Knight said. “I appreciate your candor and loyalty. It will be rewarded. Our first order of business will be to visit the secret prisoner.”

“There is more than one,” Oster said.

“One is more secret than the others,” the Rogue Knight said.

“Perhaps, but that prisoner—” Oster began.

“Is now under my control,” the Rogue Knight finished. “We cannot win the coming battle by force. Bargaining may be necessary.”

Oster tapped the side of his nose. “Savvy thought. You're no fool.”

“It's seldom listed among my faults,” the Rogue Knight said. “Can you confirm the identity of the prisoner?”

“I have no idea,” Oster said. “Only the Dreadknight knew, along with a few of those Enforcer types who come and go. The rest of us never even glimpsed the prisoner. But you're right. You now have the authority to find out.”

“Make that our first destination,” the Rogue Knight said.

They walked through the yawning gates of Blackmont Castle and into a courtyard built to intimidate. Jace pointed out a row of brownish skulls mounted on spikes. Cole noticed a collection of yellowed rib cages. The Rogue Knight ordered the gates closed behind them. He then sent three of his knights to ensure they stayed shut.

Oster led the way into the castle itself. They climbed stairs and traversed halls. Guardsmen saluted as they passed. At length they reached a sturdy iron door guarded by two men in armor.

“Meet the Rogue Knight,” Oster said to the guards. “He’s the new champion of Edgemont.”

“Open the door and stand aside,” the Rogue Knight ordered.

The guards glanced at each other uncomfortably. One of them cleared his throat. “We can’t let you pass.”

“I’m the champion of this town and the master of this castle,” the Rogue Knight said, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. “Step aside, or you will be executed for treason.”

“Our orders come from a higher authority,” one of the guards explained.

Cole noticed Dalton backing up. He did likewise. It looked like a fight was brewing.

The Rogue Knight drew his sword. “There is no higher authority in my town or in my castle,” he said, his voice soft but adamant. “Final warning.” The knights behind the Rogue Knight took out their weapons as well.

“He just dispatched the Dreadknight in single combat,” Oster stressed. “Do you really want to resist his orders?”

“He’ll be champion for a matter of minutes,” one of the guards said. “Are you sure you want to side with him and face execution by the Enforcers?”

“By all laws and traditions, the Rogue Knight is our true champion,” Oster said. “Must you insist on an immediate death? Are you that loyal to the High King’s attack dogs?”

“We know our duty,” the other guard said. “The Dreadknight had permission to access the prisoner. No other person outside the Enforcers has been authorized.”

“I admire your commitment to your duty,” the Rogue Knight said. “Unfortunately, your allegiance is misplaced. I find you guilty of treason.” The Rogue Knight made a gesture with two fingers.

Cole looked away as two knights stepped forward. He heard weapons clash a couple of times. When he looked back, the guards were on the ground. Crouching, Oster retrieved a set of keys.

Dalton gaped at the fallen guards with wide eyes. Cole met his gaze and saw his own revulsion reflected there. Jace, on the other hand, appeared unfazed by the violence. Cole wondered how much of that was a facade.

“How many other guards?” the Rogue Knight asked.

“Ten, I believe,” Oster said, inserting a key into the iron door and hauling it open.

“Will they surrender?” the Rogue Knight inquired.

“Doubtful,” Oster said. “They will have been briefed the same as these two.”

The Rogue Knight turned to his knights. “Go ahead of us. Give any guards you encounter the chance to surrender. Explain my victory and my intentions. If they insist on treason, execute them.”

“Let me accompany your knights,” Oster said. “The guards know me. As second knight, I was third in command here. At least they’ll know the tale of your victory is authentic if it comes from my lips.”

“Very well,” the Rogue Knight agreed.

“You’ll find the prisoner at the very top of the stairs,” Oster said. “I’ll await you there.”

Six knights and Oster hurried through the door and up the stone steps, leaving the Rogue Knight alone with Mira, Cole, Dalton, Jace, Twitch, Joe, Skye, and Sultan. The Rogue Knight turned to address them.

“Some of you possess enchanting abilities,” he said.

“I do,” Skye replied. “As does Sultan. The boy Dalton has some skill as well.”

“It is only a matter of time before we are attacked from within and without,” the Rogue Knight said. “If necessary, I can fight my way free with my knights, but I won’t be able to protect Mira and Honor against the numbers I expect to combine against us. Your talents may be required to get the princesses to safety.”

“You’ll let us go?” Mira asked.

“I never had any intent to harm you,” the Rogue Knight said. “I hoped that your company might improve my chances of securing the duels I desire. But today, keeping you with me could injure you.”

“What are you trying to accomplish with your duels?” Mira asked.

The Rogue Knight paused. “I want to take back Elloweer. Just as your father dealt with you unjustly, he has dealt unfairly with the kingdoms under his stewardship. The office of High Shaper was never meant for a dictator. Your father drove four of the five Grand Shapers into hiding and claimed ownership of kingdoms that should have benefitted from his protection. He invokes arcane and questionable powers to secure his position and accomplish his aims. We are only beginning to see the destruction his greed will produce. Somebody has to stop him.”

“Why not work with the resistance?” Skye asked. “The Unseen?”

“You have your methods,” the Rogue Knight replied. “I have mine. I’ll work with you today, if you will protect the princesses.”

“We’re here to serve them,” Skye assured him.

“I hope so,” the Rogue Knight said. “If I entrust them to your care, I will hold you personally responsible for their welfare.”

“What do you know of the threat to the northwest?” Skye asked. “The monster Morgassa.”

“I haven’t heard that name,” the Rogue Knight said. “I know of the monster. Although the creature is coming in this direction, I understand that it remains several days away.”

Cole heard voices from up the stairs, followed by the sharp clang of metal against metal. Silence followed.

“This way,” the Rogue Knight said.

They curved up the stairs to a large room where several guards lay dead. An iron door stood open, leading to another staircase. More voices could be heard from above. After a few moments, hurried footsteps tromped down the stairs. The Halfknight came into view.

“The way to the highest cell is clear,” the undersize knight reported. “The three guards up top surrendered and are being imprisoned.”

“Well done,” the Rogue Knight said. “Lead on, Minimus.”

They followed the small knight up the winding stair, past several iron doors with peepholes that opened from the outside. Cole wondered who else was kept in this high-security tower. Were there any possible allies here who

could help them out? Could any of the kids from Arizona have ended up here?

Cole's thighs were burning with exertion by the time they reached the top of the stairs. Oster and the other knights awaited them there.

"My knights will now return to the bottom of the tower and prevent anyone from coming up. I will be down before long to arrange our defenses." As the knights descended the stairs, the Rogue Knight regarded Oster. "You have the key?"

Oster unlocked the iron door at the top of the stairs, and Cole shifted into position to peek inside. Would they have Honor chained up? Had she heard the guards fighting? Did she know rescuers were coming?

When Oster heaved the door open, the Rogue Knight moved in front of Cole, blocking his view. The Rogue Knight directed Oster to stand aside and deferred to Mira. "After you."

Mira went through the doorway, followed by the Rogue Knight. Cole came in after them.

The cell was not what Cole had expected. The room had carpets on the floors, tapestries on the wall, and a canopied bed. One wall supported shelves full of colorful books. Many toys were scattered about: a wooden rocking horse, a pretend sword, several marionettes, dozens of marbles, platoons of toy soldiers, a drum, and a few stuffed animals. A number of chests and trunks housed other mysteries.

On the far side of the room, seated at a low table, was a boy of six or seven years, drawing on a small blackboard with a hunk of chalk. He looked up at Mira and the others who had intruded on him, more curious than startled.

Cole and Dalton exchanged a look of confusion. The prisoner was a little kid?

"Hello," Mira said in a kind voice.

"Hi," the kid answered. "Who are you?"

"I'm Mira," she said. "Do you stay here alone?"

"Most of the time," the boy said. "Zola brings my food. Vince comes by. And those other guys sometimes. Are we going somewhere?"

"Maybe," Mira said. "Why do you ask?"

“All the new people,” the boy said. He pointed at the Rogue Knight. “That one is a fighter like Vince.”

“Yes,” Mira said.

“Do you kill people?” the boy asked the Rogue Knight.

“Sometimes,” the Rogue Knight said.

“Your side got bashed in,” the boy said. “Somebody tried to kill you.”

“That’s right,” the Rogue Knight said.

“Are you a good guy or a bad guy?” the boy asked.

“He’s mostly good,” Mira assured him.

“Vince has to fight a guy today,” the boy said. “Sometimes good guys have to fight.”

Cole realized that Vince must be the Dreadknight. He hoped nobody told the kid what had just happened.

“How long have you been here?” Mira asked sweetly.

“Lots of days,” the kid said. He started drawing again.

“Do you like it here?” Mira asked.

The boy shrugged. “It’s better than the other place. I thought I would get to go home, but not yet.”

“Where is home?” Mira asked.

“Ohio,” the boy said. “My town is called Springboro.”

Cole’s eyebrows shot up, and he and Dalton looked at each other again. Another kid from their world!

“Where was the other place?” Mira asked. “The worse place?”

“Dreamland,” the boy said. “It was scary there. The skeletons wanted to eat me.”

Mira paused. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Brady.”

## CHAPTER

# 24

## INMATES

**C**ole could hardly believe his ears. Was this really the kid who had created a wilderness full of killer skeletons and giant cheesecakes? A semblance of Brady's babysitter had told them he was dead. That the monsters had finally gotten him.

"Was there ever a girl here called Honor?" the Rogue Knight asked.

"Or Nori?" Mira added.

Brady wrinkled his nose. "Nope, the only lady is Zola."

"How old is Zola?" Mira asked.

"She looks like a mommy," Brady said.

"How did you get here?" Mira asked.

"They came to Dreamland and got me," Brady said. "At first I thought they were Blind Ones. They dressed and acted like Blind Ones. But they didn't kill me. They took me away from Dreamland."

"We were there too," Cole said. "In Dreamland. People call it Brady's Wilderness. We met Amanda."

"You saw her?" Brady exclaimed, excited.

"She helped us," Cole said.

"Is she okay?" Brady asked.

"She's fine," Cole said.



“I didn’t want to leave without her,” Brady said. “The guys who took me wouldn’t go back.”

“Did they bring you here after Dreamland?” Mira asked.

“Not at first,” Brady said. “They told me if I let them, they could make the dream end. I didn’t want those dreams anymore. I gave away my dreaming. I thought I would wake up and be home.”

“They made the dreams stop?” Mira asked.

“It worked,” Brady said. “My dreams never happen anymore. No giant cookies. No magic toys. But no bad guys either. None of it happens.”

“They took his power,” Twitch murmured.

“After they took away your dreams, they brought you here?” Mira asked.

“Yes,” Brady said. “They can’t take me home yet. They said it’s too far.” Leaning forward, he whispered, “I think maybe they’re kidnappers.”

“They are,” Mira said. “Don’t worry. We’re here to help you.” Mira turned and lowered her voice. “Can somebody distract him?”

Dalton went forward, knelt down, and began asking Brady about the picture he was drawing. Brady responded cheerfully to the attention.

Mira addressed the others. “That kid had serious power. Back in Sambria, they could have made another Carnag.”

“Wouldn’t we have heard of it?” Twitch asked.

“It may not have happened that long ago,” Joe said. “How long has Brady been here?”

“A few weeks,” Oster said. “He could have been held elsewhere before. I don’t know the history.”

“They might have more control of the creature this time,” Joe speculated. “It may not be rampaging.”

“Why bring Brady here?” Jace asked.

“Whatever they did with his power, it can’t reach him in Elloweer,” Mira said. “It would only work in Sambria. Maybe they wanted to keep Brady far away.”

“They probably took all of his shaping ability,” Cole said. “You know, like Carnag tried to do to you, Mira. If Brady volunteered, they could have completely separated him from his power.”

“Then why would they need him?” Jace asked. “What good is he without any power?”

“I don’t know,” Mira said. “There must be a reason. We need to learn more about how shapecrafting works.”

They heard noisy footsteps on the stairs. Minimus entered the room, breathing hard. “We’re under attack,” the Halfknight announced, panting. “The town offered little resistance. Guardsmen are trying to open the castle gates from both sides.”

“Blast!” the Rogue Knight exclaimed. He whirled to Oster. “Do you know the other prisoners up here?”

“There are only a few others,” Oster said. “This tower is for unnamed captives. None are known to me.”

“Will you help Mira and her friends escape?” the Rogue Knight asked. “Can you smuggle them away from Edgemont?”

“I know three hidden ways out of the castle,” Oster said.

“We can help,” Skye said. “Sultan and I will cloak us in seemings.”

“That would give us a fighting chance,” Oster said.

The Rogue Knight laid a hand on the Halfknight’s armored shoulder. “Minimus, stay with Mira until we find each other again. Serve her well. Protect her at all costs. Oster, help them escape, then return to me once they are away.”

“We have to check the other prisoners,” Mira said anxiously. “Just in case.”

“Very well,” the Rogue Knight said. “Be swift. We are greatly outnumbered. Our enemies will overrun this castle shortly.”

“We’ll hurry,” Mira promised.

The Rogue Knight drew his sword. “I must join my knights.” He hurried from the room and bounded down the stairs. Cole suspected that anyone else who tried to run in armor like that would end up in a dented pile at the bottom of the stairway.

“Come on, Brady!” Mira called.

The boy looked up from where he sat with Dalton. “We’re leaving?”

“Yes,” Mira said.

“A hostage could prove useful,” Oster mused.

“Not a hostage,” Mira said. “We’re freeing him.”

“Are you sure?” Skye asked. “Joining us may be a rough road for the little guy.”

“He is clearly of high value to our enemies,” Sultan said. “And he doesn’t belong to them.”

“We can’t leave him behind,” Mira insisted. “Who knows what they might do to him?”

“I agree,” Sultan replied. “I’ll watch out for him.”

Holding Dalton’s hand, Brady followed them out of the room. They started down the stairs, stopping at the next iron door. Oster tried a few keys before he found the right one. The room was empty.

Behind the next iron door they found a man chained to the wall. Blindfolded and gagged, his hair was long and disheveled.

“I know this one,” Oster said. “He was an Enforcer and a powerful enchanter. He lost his mind. We don’t want dealings with him.”

They shut the door and moved on. From a distance, through barred windows, Cole heard the clash of combat. A man screamed in pain. Other voices shouted orders.

Cole understood why Mira wanted to check the cells, but the castle was falling. What if they couldn’t make it out? He tried to ignore the churning nervousness in his gut.

Oster unlocked another door to reveal an empty room. The next door opened on a swarthy woman seated at a wooden table. When her eyes found Cole, she glared and snarled. “You?”

“Secha?” Cole exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

She brushed hair away from her face. “Where are the Enforcers?”

“You were back in Carthage with Ansel,” Mira recalled.

“Aye, missy, until the Enforcers came for us. Where are they?”

“No Enforcers here,” Joe said. “We’re in charge for now. You vowed not to follow us.”

“Mayhap I did,” Secha said. “But I never counted on you ruining us. Some Enforcers caught up with us just a few days after you left. Charming lot.

One called the Hunter was ready to kill Ansel for information about Miracle Pemberton. And Ansel was prepared to die to keep his oath to you. So I intervened. I volunteered to go with them and help them find you.”

“Is the Hunter here?” Joe asked in alarm.

“Not right now,” Secha said. “Moves around a lot, that one. You’ve made yourselves quite an enemy. And you spoiled my life.”

“Ansel spoiled your life,” Cole said. “He should have left me alone.”

“I reckon he entertains that thought as he rots in a Carthage dungeon,” Secha said darkly. She squinted at Cole. “You’ve changed a bit. You’ve a hint of power in you now.” Her eyes considered Mira. “You’re the royal scion they’re after?”

“How long have you been here?” Mira asked.

“Only since yesterday.”

“Rings true,” Oster said. “Leastways, they brought in a new prisoner last night.”

“How did they plan to use you?” Mira asked.

“I know your faces,” Secha said. “They wanted help spotting you. I wasn’t privy to the full extent of their scheme. This hasn’t been pleasant. I’m a prisoner.”

“Time is against us,” Oster reminded everyone.

“Let’s keep checking,” Mira decided. “Leave her. She’s not important.”

They backed out of the room, and Oster closed the door.

“She broke her vow,” Joe pointed out. “She could still cause trouble.”

“We have bigger problems right now,” Mira said, hustling down the stairs.

“This next door is where we put the guards who surrendered,” Oster said. “There’s just one more.”

He tried a couple of keys before opening the final iron door to reveal an older man with messy white hair and weary eyes. He sat on the edge of a simple cot. One leg was missing halfway past his thigh. The other ended just below the knee.

“Mutiny?” the man asked curiously.

“I don’t know this man,” Oster said.

Mira stepped closer. “Who are you?”

The prisoner leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "It can't be."

"Excuse me?" Mira said.

"Miracle?" he asked.

"How do you know me?"

"I was a boy when we knew each other," he said. "I was a bit younger than you. I'm Reginald Waters."

"Reggie?" she gasped. "Yes, I see it now. What happened to you?"

"I had charge over Honor for years," he said. "Not at first. She has been in my care the last five decades. Until I failed her."

"When?" Mira asked. "How?"

"Not long ago," he said. "Weeks, not months."

"Her star was in the sky," Mira said.

"It appeared the day she was taken from me," Reginald said. "I had a way to contact your mother. I informed her I had lost my Honor."

"Is Nori all right?" Mira asked. "Where is she? We'll help her."

"I'm not sure anyone can help her," Reginald said. "She was seized by men loyal to Trillian."

"The torivor?" Dalton exclaimed, eyes bulging.

"Who?" Cole asked. Dalton clearly knew enough about this Trillian person to be afraid, but Cole had never heard the name.

"The caged demon," Oster said grimly. "The bane of Elloweer. Trillian the torivor."

"His men cut me down," Reginald said. "They left me to die and took her to him. Enforcers were on our trail at the time. They found me and stanced my wounds. Brought me here. Several days later her star went out."

Cole tried not to stare at Reginald's maimed legs. The man didn't look frail, but he was definitely old. Perhaps in his younger days he would have won the fight.

Oster crossed to a window. Craning his neck, he leaned against the bars. "The gates are breeched," he reported.

"Come with us," Mira said to Reginald. "The castle is under attack. We have a chance to flee."

“I can weave a tight seeming,” Reginald said. “But changing these stumps into legs is beyond me. Go. Get the word out about your sister.”

“Can we carry him?” Mira asked.

“Go!” Reginald demanded. “Leave the door open, and I’ll manage. I’ve failed one princess. I won’t risk slowing you. It’s not negotiable. Run!”

“Time grows short,” Oster warned.

“All right,” Mira said. “Thank you, Reggie. Take care.”

“I’ll leave the doors open at the base of the tower,” Oster said. He exited the room and started down the stairs. The others followed.

## CHAPTER

# 25

## ESCAPE

**C**ole focused on descending the stairs as quickly as he could without tripping. Ahead of him, Sultan raced down two steps at a time, toting Brady over one shoulder.

“Why are we running?” Brady asked, looking up at Cole.

“It’s good exercise,” Cole told him.

Brady looked doubtful. “I think the bad guys found me.”

“We’ll be okay,” Sultan assured him as they jounced downward. “We’ll get away.”

They reached the iron door at the base of the tower. A bulky knight stood guard there, holding a large flanged mace. Several broken bodies lay scattered around the hall.

“Which way?” Minimus asked the knight.

He pointed down the hall with two fingers. From the other direction Cole heard fighting.

“That will work,” Oster said hurriedly. “Follow me.”

Unlike the men who rode with the Rogue Knight, Oster did not wear a full suit of armor. He had a long shirt with metal scales, a helmet, and leather guards on his arms and legs. As Oster jogged in the lead, Cole could tell the armor weighed him down enough to make running a chore. Minimus trotted

beside Cole, but despite his complete shell of solid armor, the Halfknight moved as if unburdened.

They raced down the hall, turned a corner, went through a door, then rushed down some steps. At the bottom they charged along another hall toward a T intersection. Composed of dark stone blocks, the corridors all looked the same to Cole. He knew they were a few floors above ground level, but otherwise he felt completely disoriented.

As they passed a window, Cole glimpsed two knights out in the courtyard pressed by attackers on all sides. Bodies had piled up around them. Most of the attackers wore the uniforms of Merriston guardsmen.

Oster turned left at the T, then stopped short and raced the other way. When Cole reached the intersection, he found they had run into a large group of legionnaires. Cole sprinted with everything he had as the legionnaires gave chase.

Up ahead, where the hall elbowed, the Rogue Knight ran into view with three other knights. They charged down the hall past Cole toward the legionnaires. Glancing back, Cole saw the legionnaires jostle to a halt. Standing shoulder to shoulder, the four knights filled the hall, weapons drawn, blocking the way. Cole followed Oster around the corner and lost sight of them.

“Nice work,” Sultan told Skye.

“Won’t hold them long,” she replied.

Only then did Cole realize that the Rogue Knight and his three companions had been illusions. That made more sense. The timing had been unbelievably lucky!

Oster led them down branching hallways, some narrow, others wide. While the others ran hard, Twitch hopped and fluttered. They hurried through a dining room with long tables and into a corridor on the far side. Around the next corner they ran into several oncoming guardsmen with crossbows. As the men took aim, a stone wall appeared, blocking them from view. Doubling back, Cole crouched and weaved as quarrels clacked against the wall beyond him. At least the crossbowmen couldn’t see their targets.



As they raced down halls and around corners, walls kept appearing behind them, blending with the actual walls of the castle to obscure their trail. Cole was out of breath, but he kept running hard.

“They shot you,” Brady said from his position draped over Sultan’s shoulder.

Cole noticed Brady staring at a quarrel buried under Sultan’s unburdened shoulder.

“I’ve had worse,” Sultan replied.

Brady reached a tentative hand toward the protruding projectile.

“No,” Cole warned. “You’ll make it worse.”

They came around another corner, and another fake wall arose behind them. “We need disguises,” Skye panted. “I didn’t realize how many soldiers we would encounter.”

“Legionnaires?” Sultan asked.

“Anything so we’re not instant targets,” Skye replied.

“I’ll have to let some of the walls drop,” Sultan said.

“Just leave the last one up,” Skye suggested. “If they don’t have the castle memorized, that should be enough to shake them.”

Cole watched as everyone in their group became legionnaires. The kids and Minimus appeared much taller. Instead of making Brady a legionnaire, the young boy merged with Sultan’s false persona.

“I thought we’d try the dungeon exit,” Oster said from the front. “That way is cut off now. We’ll have to use the champion’s quarters. There will be guards out front.”

“We don’t have to run from every enemy,” Minimus said, his high voice incongruent with his full-size seeming. “Let me handle the guards.”

“Some of our best guardsmen get posted at the champion’s quarters,” Oster explained. “Keeping all but the champion out is their duty. I’d hate to harm them.”

“Nonlethal force,” Minimus replied. “Got it.”

“How can I help?” asked the legionnaire with Dalton’s voice.

“If we run into more trouble,” Skye said, “I may have to drop some of our disguises to raise defensive seemings. You can help cover for me.”

“Why did you all turn into soldiers?” Brady asked. It was strange hearing his voice without seeing him.

“It’s pretend,” Cole said. “Like rainbows.”

“Rainbows aren’t pretend,” Brady argued.

“I mean like how rainbows aren’t solid,” Cole said, short of breath from all the running. “We’re using magic costumes.”

“Are we still in Dreamland?” Brady asked.

“Kind of,” Cole said. “But not like before. No dinosaurs.”

While passing through a doorway, their disguises dropped. “Scrubber,” Skye called.

“I’m on it,” Sultan said. Their legionnaire seemings promptly returned.

They rushed up some stairs into an anteroom with a large pair of double doors on the far side. Two guards protected the doors, armed with polearms.

“The old champion is dead,” Oster declared. “The new one has fled. We’re under orders to secure these quarters.”

“Hold it,” one of the guards said, pointing the blade at the end of his pole at Oster. “These quarters are secure. The doors only open under direct orders from the champion.”

“We currently have no champion,” Oster said.

“Until that is resolved, nobody enters,” the guard insisted.

“Drop my disguise,” Oster said.

Instantly the seeming vanished.

“Oster?” the guard asked. “What’s going on?”

“I’m here under orders,” Oster said. “With the Dreadknight gone and the Rogue Knight on the run, Desmond is now master of Edgemont. He wants me here to protect our sensitive documents from Merriston intruders.”

“Who are these other folk?” the guard asked.

“We’re using seemings.” Oster turned and gave a nod. Some of the seemings disappeared. Three of them changed. Minimus now looked like a sickly child. Joe appeared to be a teenage girl. Sultan became an elderly humpbacked woman. Cole supposed that Brady was the hump.

“These people are in my care,” Oster said. “Women and children. Desmond wants them safe.”

The guards glanced at each other. “All right, Oster. Just confirm your identity with today’s password.”

“Downstream,” Oster said.

“And your identity slogan?”

“Ignore nothing.”

The guards moved aside. Oster waved for the others to go ahead. “Don’t admit anyone else besides Desmond,” he admonished the guards. “And don’t mention seeing me to anyone but him.”

“Understood,” the guard said.

Oster came inside and pulled the doors closed, locking them. Unlike every other part of Blackmont Castle that Cole had seen, the champion’s quarters were spacious and beautifully furnished. The bearskins on the ground and mounted trophy heads on the wall suggested that the Dreadknight had been a hunter.

Oster led them through a few handsome rooms to a bedchamber. He went to the large bed made of varnished logs, and started pushing. “A little help?” he asked.

Minimus hustled over to the bed, and together they slid it sideways. Minimus’s and Sultan’s seemings dissipated. Joe no longer appeared to be a teenage girl.

“The floor beneath the bed is a seeming,” Oster said. “Stairs lead down.”

“You all go,” Minimus said. “I’ll pull the bed back into place to make it harder for anyone to chase us. I’ll crawl under it and follow you.”

“The bed is heavy,” Oster warned.

“I felt its weight,” Minimus said. “I’m small but mighty. I can handle it.”

“Would you like me to take the boy?” Oster asked Sultan.

“I have him,” Sultan said, his face shiny with perspiration. “We may need your sword up ahead.”

“You know I can walk, right?” Brady said.

“I want to make sure we’re quick,” Sultan explained.

“You’re wounded,” Joe said. “Give me the boy.” Sultan handed Brady to Joe, who slung the boy over his shoulder.

Cole followed Jace and Twitch through the fake floor. With each step, the insubstantial floor came higher on his body until his head sank below it. Dim globes on the wall provided light. At the bottom of the long flight of stairs, Cole found himself beside Dalton.

“Having fun?” Cole asked.

“That was the first time I’ve ever been shot at,” Dalton said. “I feel bad for Sultan. That has to hurt!”

“Come on,” Oster urged.

As Cole followed, from above and behind, he heard the sound of the bed sliding into place. He kept glancing back until he saw Minimus catch up with the group.

“We should be in the clear now,” Oster said. “Only a couple of the other knights know about this passage, and they have their hands full with the Rogue Knight. Once we’re outside the castle, we should make for the lower stables. If we can get you on good horses, I expect you can ride clear of all this. Any idea where you’re going?”

“To find Trillian the torivor,” Mira said.

Cole cast a quick, nervous glance at Dalton, still curious what his friend knew about Trillian. Dalton leaned his way and whispered, “He’s a caged monster. Sort of like the Ellowine boogeyman.”

Oster stopped walking. “Today I’ve heard some things that weren’t meant for my ears,” he said. He held out a hand toward Mira. “I understand you’re Miracle Pemberton. And it sounded like Trillian has your sister, Honor. But if Trillian has claimed her, the story ends there. The torivor is imprisoned at the Lost Palace for a reason. He is one of the most powerful beings in the five kingdoms. Maybe *the* most powerful. Trillian can send servants beyond his borders, but he can’t leave. However, if you enter his domain, you’ll be at his mercy.”

“I appreciate the advice,” Mira said. “We’re going in that direction, though. The rest we’ll figure out on the way.”

Oster shook his head and started walking again. “If you avoid the Lost Palace, that route carries some benefit. Not a lot of people will want to follow you to the northeast. For the sake of my peace, please give it a lot of thought

before approaching the Lost Palace. Talk to some locals. Learn what perils await you. Consider alternatives.”

“I can tell Mira about Trillian,” Skye said. “We won’t rush into anything.”

They continued forward. Oster glanced back at Mira. “Are you really the daughter of the High King? Weren’t his daughters killed?”

“He staged our deaths and stole our shaping abilities,” Mira explained. “It stopped us from aging.”

Oster didn’t ask more questions.

Cole matched Dalton’s pace and spoke softly to him. “What’s the full story on Trillian?” he asked.

Dalton sucked in a breath. “Oster covered the basics. I don’t know much more, just stuff I’ve heard at the Silver Lining. People in Elloweer love secrets—they hide behind illusions, they use passwords, they trade rumors. But they don’t want to know more about the torivor. They just want him locked away. Based on the little I’ve heard, this guy is a walking horror movie.”

“And we’re going right to his door?” Cole said. “Great.”

What were they going to do when they got to Trillian? Couldn’t they survive one crisis before racing to another? Cole felt a distressingly familiar tension as he considered the road ahead.

“I want to walk,” Brady complained after a short time.

“We’re in a hurry,” Joe said.

“I can hurry!” Brady fussed. “I’m not a baby!”

Joe set him down. “If you walk slowly, I’ll pick you up again,” he warned.

Brady scampered ahead until he was right behind Oster. The floor of the corridor sloped downward. Damaged masonry and dried mud along portions of the floor hinted that the passage wasn’t used very often. Something scuttled in a shadowy corner.

“We made it,” Oster said. They had reached a huge door of corroded iron set in a rusty frame. Oster threw back three bolts. “No telling for certain who is on the other side. Ready?”

They all became legionnaires.

“That’ll do,” Oster said, leaning and straining to pull the large door. Minimus lent a hand, and the door groaned open.

From the doorway Cole saw only darkness. Skye extended a hand, and a dim globe of light drifted into the room, revealing a dirt floor and a bunch of old plows and farming tools.

“Where are we?” Skye asked.

“Smokehouse basement,” Oster said. “This door is hidden by a seeming, as is the trapdoor up in the smokehouse.”

They filed into the room. It reeked of dust, soot, and old metal. Oster went up a creaky flight of steps, unfastened a bolt, and opened the trapdoor. “All clear,” he said.

They went up into the smokehouse. The place was deserted. Cole could taste smoked meat in the air. Oster peeked out the front door. “Nobody in sight,” he said. “They aren’t here to sack the town. They want the Rogue Knight, and he’s keeping them busy up at the castle.”

Sultan collapsed. Suddenly, half of them were no longer legionnaires, including him. He lay motionless, facedown.

Crouching beside the fallen illusionist, Joe examined the wound under his shoulder. The shaft protruded from near the top of the armpit. “He’s lost a lot of blood,” Joe said. “His shirt is soaked. The seeming masked how bad this is.” Using a knife, he cut away the material around the quarrel. Jace edged in as close as he could, looking over Joe’s shoulder. Twitch kept his distance. “It must have hit a blood vessel. Hopefully, not the main artery, but he’s in bad shape.”

“He needs Band-Aids,” Brady advised.

“Come here,” Cole said, leading Brady away from Sultan.

“I hate it here,” Brady whispered. “People always die.”

“We’ll try to help him,” Cole said, watching worriedly.

Joe leaned close and probed near the wound. Sultan flinched and growled in pain. Propping himself up one arm, Sultan looked around the room with wide eyes. “What happened?”

“You passed out,” Joe said. “You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“You had better go,” Sultan said. “There’s no time for this.”

“You’ll die if we leave you,” Joe said, taking some bandages from a pouch he wore. He packed the bandages around the wound. “I don’t want to try to

pull the quarrel out yet. I'd break off the shaft, but it's too short and thick to snap easily. Cruel little dart. Try not to jostle it." He tied the bandages in place with twine. "Let's hope the pressure slows the bleeding."

"Thank you," Sultan said.

Joe helped Sultan up. "Come on. We're going to get you to those horses."

"Can you make yourself a legionnaire?" Skye asked Dalton.

"Yes," Dalton replied, creating the seeming after a moment's effort. "I can probably do somebody else too."

"Okay, you and Cole," Skye said. "I can cover the others."

"That's nine people!" Dalton exclaimed.

"Eight," Skye said. "I'll hold Brady and make him part of my soldier." She picked him up. Everybody became legionnaires again.

"You got me?" Cole asked Dalton.

"Looking good, Cole," Skye said. "Shall we?"

"Don't hurry too much," Oster advised. "We want to look like a patrol investigating. It's okay that Sultan was injured. We could have been involved in fighting already. The uniforms should convince most to ignore us, except perhaps a legionnaire commander. I didn't see anyone in the immediate area. Follow me."

They exited the smokehouse and made their way past some other buildings, toward a complex of stables adjoining some large corrals. Blackmont Castle stood behind them on higher ground. The sounds of fighting were muted by the distance.

Cole resisted the urge to increase his pace. He made a point of looking around at the surrounding structures, as if searching for someone. The illusionary legionnaires looked different from before. With the seemings up and nobody speaking, he found it hard to be sure who everybody else was, except for the legionnaire helping his wounded comrade.

The stables drew gradually nearer. The area seemed deserted. Cole figured most people had opted to hide out until the fighting was done.

Once inside the nearest stable, they found two long rows of stalls filled with horses. Skye dropped the legionnaire seemings. Oster trotted to a storage

closet and began taking out saddles. “Everyone who knows how, lend a hand,” he said.

Cole had learned to care for mules back when he left the slave caravan. He figured saddling a horse couldn’t be too different, and he was right.

Everyone helped prep horses besides Dalton and Brady, who sat with Sultan. The wounded illusionist rested on the floor with one shoulder against the wall, head bowed. Cole didn’t like the look on his face. He seemed out of it.

Once the horses were ready, everyone mounted up. Skye put Brady in front of her, arms around him protectively. Joe helped Sultan climb onto a horse. The illusionist slouched and had to brace himself with his free hand, but he held the reins and stayed in the saddle. Minimus had selected the smallest horse he could find.

Oster mounted a horse as well. “After you’re away, my orders are to return to the Rogue Knight,” he said. “His chances of survival aren’t great, but while he stands, I’ll stand with him. Ride swiftly.”

“I’m not sure Sultan can do this,” Joe said. “And I’m worried about Brady. We don’t want to drag him into our trouble.”

“I was going to send Sultan away with Brady,” Skye said. “That won’t work now.”

“Someone should take them both,” Joe replied. “Are you up for it?”

“Mira will need my guidance with the torivor,” Skye said. “And it seems you have some medical know-how.”

“A little,” Joe said. “Okay. Where should I go?”

Skye thought for a moment. “Ride due north to the village of Rygel’s Forge. Then go northwest to Sutner’s Ferry. Stay at the Golden Goose. They’re sympathizers. We’ll try to find you there. Stay vigilant. Once the Enforcers discover Brady is gone, they’ll come looking.”

Joe rode over to Skye and took Brady from her. The boy didn’t look pleased but kept his mouth shut.

“I’ve never ridden a horse before,” Dalton said nervously.

“Stay with us,” Skye told him. “Hold the reins a little looser. Grip with your legs. Don’t fall off.”



All but Oster became legionnaires.

“I can do my seeming,” Dalton said.

“Worry about staying on your horse,” Skye replied.

“Don’t gallop away,” Oster said. “You’ll draw less attention if you take your time. I’ll watch from here until you’re clear.”

Leaving Oster behind, they rode out of the stable and trotted away from the castle. Cole followed Skye and kept an eye on Dalton, who looked terrified even as a legionnaire. Joe and Sultan veered away from them.

Looking ahead, Cole saw the road Skye was aiming toward. When he glanced back at Joe, Sultan was on the ground. Joe had dismounted and was trying to help him get up. The big man was unconscious and too heavy for Joe to lift.

“Skye?” Cole asked.

“I see them,” she said.

Sultan staggered woozily to his feet, and Joe helped drape him over his saddle, feet on one side, head on the other. Joe mounted up and led Sultan’s horse by the reins. Slung over the saddle, Sultan didn’t look very lively. Cole hoped Joe would be able to get him medical attention soon. How good were the doctors in Elloweer? The technology seemed pretty primitive.

They reached the road without difficulty. Soon Joe, Brady, and Sultan had ridden out of view.

Cole ended up trotting beside Mira. She looked worried.

“You all right?” Cole asked.

“Do you think the Rogue Knight has any chance of escaping?” she asked. “There were so many legionnaires and guards. I know he’s a good fighter, but he can’t singlehandedly take on the whole kingdom.”

“If anyone has a chance, he does,” Cole said. “He doesn’t have to win the battle. He just has to fight his way free.”

“Except for taking me, he didn’t treat me badly,” Mira said. “I hope he makes it.”

As Cole trotted up the road, he kept glancing back at Blackmont Castle. He couldn’t tell whether the fighting had ended or if he and the others had simply moved too far away to hear it. Cole kept expecting to see a group of

horsemen coming after them. Maybe guardsmen. Maybe legionnaires. Some of the Dreadknight's men perhaps.

But time went on, and nobody came.

## CHAPTER

# 26

## THE RED ROAD

**N**ot far into the ride, when Mira mentioned that she was thirsty, they realized that they had brought no provisions. Skye had grabbed blankets with the saddles, but they lacked anything to eat or drink. Minimus volunteered to go find food and water, and rode away alone.

As the day progressed, the road they traveled dwindled to a trail. They passed nobody coming from the opposite direction, and nobody approached from behind. By the time the sun went down, the faint trail was becoming hard to follow.

Minimus caught up to them while they were making camp off to one side of the trail near a stand of trees. The sight of the little knight filled Cole with relief. He hadn't eaten since a quick snack before dawn, prior to the duel. After a long day on horseback, Cole's mouth was dry and his gurgling stomach felt like it had begun to digest itself.

The Halfknight led a second horse burdened with supplies including biscuits, sausages, cheese, nuts, and containers of water. Skye, Cole, Mira, Jace, Twitch, Dalton, and Minimus sat in a circle to share the food.

"Should we build a fire?" Jace asked.

"I don't know," Skye replied. "Brady was tended by Enforcers. They'll send out search parties. We don't want to draw attention."

“The night is not cold,” Minimus said. “The food doesn’t require heating. No flames would be safer.”

“Where did you find all this?” Cole asked. “We weren’t expecting a feast!”

“I had to ride most of the way back to Blackmont Castle,” Minimus said. “Nobody lives out this way.”

“It’s true,” Skye said. “Hopefully, this will be the last place they’d expect us to go. Everyone knows to stay away from the torivor.”

“He has servants, though?” Cole asked.

“The Red Guard,” Skye said. “They’re the ones who must have taken Honor. If a member of the Red Guard is ever caught by legionnaires or the city guards, the penalty is death. No crime required. Members of the Unseen treat them the same way. They are servants of an ancient evil. You don’t come across them often. The chances increase as you get close to the Lost Palace.”

“I’ve heard of Trillian,” Dalton said. “People talk about him like he’s the scariest creature ever. But I’ve never heard who he actually is.”

Skye shook her head. “That’s because we don’t really know. People who go to the Lost Palace rarely return. If they do, they’ve joined the Red Guard and become Trillian’s devoted servants.”

“Haven’t you interrogated members of the Red Guard?” Jace asked.

“I’ve only ever seen one,” Skye said. “It was back when I was new to the Unseen. I didn’t get to talk with him, but I understand that he refused to answer any questions, even under torture. Frankly, I think most people prefer to leave the torivor alone. We don’t need to understand him as long as he stays put. Nobody wants to stir up that hornet’s nest. He’s the monster our parents scared us with to make us behave.”

“Go to bed or the torivor will get you,” Cole joked.

“Exactly,” Skye said. “Trillian has symbolized fear for generations of Ellowine children. Since he can’t leave the Lost Palace, the people of Elloweer keep away and try to ignore him.”

“And that’s where we have to go,” Twitch said.

“It’s where I have to go,” Mira corrected. “Nobody else has to follow me. I have to try to help my sister.”

Cole knew Mira's current expression. It reminded him of when she had insisted they go after Carnag. He knew she would proceed alone if necessary.

But was that smart? Of course Mira wanted to help her sister, but what good would it do Honor if Mira got captured too? If people were scared to even go near where the torivor lived, it had to be bad news. Oster had acted like it would be suicide.

Cole frowned. If the mission was ridiculously dangerous, shouldn't he skip it? If he got captured or killed, who would help Jenna? Cole glanced at Dalton, who appeared thoughtful.

Cole wondered how he would react if the torivor had taken his sister, or his parents, or Jenna. He reluctantly supposed he would do everything he could to help them, dangerous or not.

"I won't leave you," Minimus assured Mira. "I'm under orders."

"I may be useless," Jace said. "But I'm loyal."

"Useless?" Mira exclaimed. "What about when you attacked the Rogue Knight? That was one of the bravest things anyone has ever done for me!"

"Yeah." Jace chuckled darkly. "I really made him pay. He'll never tangle with me again. Attacking him was the loyal part. Failing was where the uselessness came in."

"Losing to the Rogue Knight carries no shame," Minimus said. "I doubt whether any warrior in the five kingdoms could best him."

"I didn't just lose," Jace said. "He didn't even consider me worth fighting."

"Be glad," Minimus said. "Your attempt was valiant, but the fight was not fair. He was a seasoned warrior, fully armored. You were a lad with a short sword. You have a brave heart. That can be more important than size or strength."

"Easy for you to say," Jace replied. "You're really strong."

"None of us start out strong," Minimus said. "And none of us have the exact same strengths."

"Cole, thank you, too," Mira said. "I couldn't believe it when you came flying after us. How did you make the Jumping Sword work?"

"I don't know," Cole said, grateful to be recognized along with Jace but also embarrassed. "I was really desperate, and it just happened. I haven't been

able to make it happen again.”

“You found Dalton,” Mira said. “I know you two have other friends out there still. You don’t have to feel stuck with me.”

Cole glanced at his best friend. Did he want to expose Dalton to this new threat?

“Cole found me by sticking with you,” Dalton said. “We’ll try to help.”

Cole wondered if Dalton had been able to tell he was wavering. His friend was right—if they were staying with Mira, that meant standing by her through the good and the bad.

“We’re not leaving you,” Cole said.

“We’ve made it this far together,” Twitch added.

“That doesn’t mean we’ll keep surviving,” Mira cautioned.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Twitch said. “I’m not above running away if it comes to it.”

“I’m with you too, Mira,” Skye said. “Hopefully, we’ll never have to enter the Lost Palace. Maybe we can deal with the torivor through his Red Guard. Honor could be our only hope to stop Morgassa. Let’s hope Trillian will listen to reason.”

“Morgassa?” Mira said.

“You need to fill us in,” Twitch said.

Skye explained what they had learned about Morgassa and her horde. Mira and Twitch listened with wide eyes.

“How long before she reaches the capital?” Mira asked when Skye was through.

“The Rogue Knight estimates she’s nine or ten days away from Merriston,” Minimus said. “She doesn’t hold to a straight path. She weaves around to hit any nearby towns.”

“Is the Rogue Knight keeping track of Morgassa?” Skye asked.

“He’s aware of the threat,” Minimus said. “He knows she is using figments to change people. Last week he sent a couple of his knights to investigate.”

“And they came back?” Skye asked.

“He’s never lost a knight,” Minimus said. “We’re not easy to bring down. Any of his men could defeat the greatest champions of Elloweer.”

“How did he find such talent?” Skye asked.

“He’s a unique man,” Minimus said. “Unique men follow him.”

“How much do you know about him?” Skye pressed.

“More than I can tell,” Minimus said.

“What can you tell?” Cole asked.

“The Rogue Knight is the truest person I know,” Minimus said. “I’m proud to serve him.”

“How old are you?” Jace wondered.

Minimus laughed. “Why? Because you’re all taller than me? Don’t worry, it’s a common question. Some people assume I’m a child. I’m more than twice as old as any of you besides Skye. I have never been endowed with great stature. But I embrace my humble proportions. Hence my name, Minimus, and my title, the Halfknight.”

“You named yourself?” Dalton asked.

“Nobody knew I would be so tiny at birth,” Minimus said. “That name would have been quite a coincidence. My parents were both of normal size. They had me and then a brother. He was a dwarf as well.”

“Is he a knight too?” Jace asked.

Minimus chuckled. “In his own way. Like I noted before, we all have different strengths. But my size has advantages. My opponents tend to underestimate me.”

“Are you going to eat?” Cole asked. “We’re all chowing down on the food you brought.”

“I had enough on my way here,” Minimus said. “I’m content. Part of my vow to the Rogue Knight stresses that I keep my armor on while in public. My true identity must remain secret. None of us go by our given names.”

“Do you think you could give me some lessons with a sword?” Jace asked. “Maybe I could become less useless.”

“So long as we journey together, it would be my pleasure,” Minimus replied. He stood. “And I will keep watch during the night.”

“You can’t watch all night,” Twitch said. “When will you rest?”

“I’ve always been able to cheat sleep at need,” Minimus said. “I’ll let you know if it starts dulling my edge. Tonight, sleep well. I’ll rouse you if danger

approaches.”

“I’ll lay a seeming over us that will last through the night,” Skye said. “To any onlooker, we’ll appear to be bushes and small trees.”

“You can make that hold while you sleep?” Dalton asked.

“I use some of the same principles involved with a long-term seeming,” she explained. “It will only be good until around sunrise unless I strengthen it.”

“Rest sounds good,” Twitch said, yawning. “That was a long ride.”

“It’ll be a longer one tomorrow,” Skye said.

“If nobody ever visits the Lost Palace,” Cole said, “how do you know where we’re going?”

“Nobody goes there, but everyone knows the way,” Skye said. “We just have to find the Red Road.”

“The what now?” Cole asked.

Skye gave a half smile. “You’ll see.”



The next morning, the sun seemed to rise from all directions, but it never crested the horizon. Instead, the warm twilight persisted throughout the day.

They reached the Red Road two hours into their ride. The trail had almost dwindled to nothing, then all of a sudden they arrived at the start of a broad, smooth road made of seamless red pavement. Maroon curbs ran down the sides. No cracks marred the surface. It looked like it could have been built the day before.

They stopped the horses just shy of the road. It continued as far as Cole could see.

“You see why I wasn’t worried about missing it?” Skye asked.

“You knew our trail became the road?” Cole asked.

“I thought so,” Skye said. “If I had the wrong trail, we could just have cut back and forth across the area. The Red Road runs a long way and is hard to miss.”

“Why is it here?” Dalton asked.



“Nobody knows,” Skye said. “The popular theory is that the torivor’s influence maintains it. The road runs perfectly straight for miles and leads directly to the entrance of the Lost Palace.”

“Do we ride on it or next to it?” Twitch asked.

“Why not ride on it?” Jace asked.

“Trillian can’t see beyond his domain,” Skye said, “but some believe he can see this road.”

“Then we ride next to it,” Mira said.

Skye directed her horse over to the side of the road and began paralleling it. The others fell in behind her.

As they proceeded, Cole couldn’t keep his eyes off the road. It seemed so out of place in this unpopulated wilderness.

“What if we run into Red Guards?” Twitch asked. “Do we have a plan?”

“We’ll try to bargain with them,” Skye said. “We want to use them to contact Trillian.”

“They might just want to capture or kill us,” Jace said.

“If they want a fight, I’ll give it to them,” Minimus said. “The rest of you use seemings and run.”

Something about the Red Road forbade the idle conversations they had enjoyed the previous day. Cole supposed it made Trillian the torivor seem more present. At the end of the road they would reach his palace.

Trees or heavy shrubs sometimes made them veer well away from the road. Although riding on it would have physically been easier, nobody suggested it.

They broke for meals a couple of times. Finally, the light began to fade from all horizons. Skye moved a good distance from the road and made camp. Minimus again volunteered to be the sole sentry.

On his back, Cole gazed at the stars and thought about Jenna. What if he had already missed her? What if she was in Sambria? He could have ridden through the village where they were keeping her without knowing it. If so, he might travel to all the other kingdoms without finding her.

He had located Dalton. That meant there was hope. Cole shifted on the ground, trying to get comfortable. With the help of Mira and the Unseen,

sooner or later, he would find Jenna—even if it meant multiple visits to all the kingdoms.

Where was she tonight? Was she scared? Suffering? Comfortable? Bored? What kind of shaping could she do? What if she had already freed herself? Could she be on the run?

Cole had promised he would find her. Did she still expect him to show up?

He pictured a scenario: He was far away, Creon maybe, or Necronum. Evil slave owners had trapped Jenna in a burning building. The Jumping Sword came to life in his hand, and he leaped to her rescue, springing away with her an instant before the fiery structure collapsed.

She would be so amazed! He would seem like a superhero!

The daydream made him cringe. Did he really still want to rescue her so she would like him more? Maybe a little. But those daydreams were more fun in a time without real danger. It would be such a relief to find her safe, to be reunited with another friend from home.

Did he still have a crush on her? Sure, but that wasn't what really mattered. What mattered more was their friendship. Cole remembered something Jace had said about Mira: just because he was a kid, it didn't mean his feelings weren't real.

The next day began with an actual sunrise. Around midday, a dense grove of trees forced them well away from the Red Road. As they made their way around the trees, the Lost Palace came into view.

“Oh, no,” Dalton murmured.

The dilapidated structure looked like the charred skeleton of a castle, spindly and crooked, as if it had survived a prolonged artillery barrage. A tall fence of barbed iron spikes enclosed an area much wider than the palace itself. Sickly mist swirled low across the stony, uneven grounds, eddying in irregular depressions. In defiance of the bright day, a gray haze hovered over the whole area, lending a sickly gloom to the precarious towers.

“It looks abandoned,” Dalton said.

“No,” Jace said. “It looks like somebody massacred everyone and then torched the place.”

“Comforting thought,” Twitch mumbled.

“I don’t see the Red Guard,” Mira said.

“I don’t see anybody,” Cole added.

“Make no mistake,” Skye said. “Trillian is in there.”

The Red Road went right up to the black iron gate. A dark, broken road continued on the far side, the color of old scabs.

“What should we do?” Dalton asked.

“We take a closer look,” Cole said.

They rode down to where the Red Road ended at the outer gate of the Lost Palace and dismounted. Through the bars of the fence, Cole watched a cloud of vapor heaving in and out of a cavity in the rocks, as if a huge monster inside was breathing. Growing out of cracks and creases, sparse, malnourished weeds limply clung to life. Fuzzy scum added mottled brown patches to a few meager puddles.

“Hello?” Mira called loudly, hands cupped around her mouth.

Cole flinched at the sudden noise in this dead, quiet place. Her voice did not echo. The shouted word fell flat, as if swallowed by a vast nothingness. No reply came from the Lost Palace.

Empty minutes passed.

“I don’t think anyone is coming,” Cole finally said.

“Won’t be an easy climb,” Dalton observed, gazing up at the fence. “Those barbs look sharp.”

“I could probably jump it,” Twitch said without enthusiasm.

“I’ll try the road,” Jace said. “The rest of you get back.”

“Are you sure?” Skye asked.

“If we want to bargain with his guy, we need to let him know we’re here,” Jace replied. “But only one of us should risk it.”

Jace stepped onto the road and fell to his hands and knees, his body shaking. Turning slowly, he reached out a trembling hand. “Kill me,” he rasped.

Then he started laughing.

“You’re such a jerk,” Mira said angrily.

Jace stood up. “I couldn’t resist.”

“Um, guys,” Cole said.

“What?” Jace asked.

“The gate is open.”

## CHAPTER

# 27

## THE LOST PALACE

“**D**id you *see* the gate open?” Skye asked.

“No,” Cole said. “I was watching Jace. I didn’t hear it either.”

“The gate was definitely closed a minute ago,” Twitch said.

“Did anyone see it open?” Skye asked.

Nobody spoke up.

“Let’s wait and see who comes,” Jace said. “You guys might want to hide.”

“And leave you here alone?” Mira asked.

“The torivor knows I’m here,” Jace said. “He might not know about you guys.”

“Are we sure Trillian saw you?” Dalton asked. “Maybe someone is about to leave.”

“It opened right after I stepped onto the Red Road,” Jace said. He looked up and down the road. “I don’t see anybody else coming.”

“We’ll wait with you,” Skye said. “I’m not sure what good hiding will do. We came here to bargain. We don’t want to seem weak.”

“Don’t worry,” Minimus said, drawing his sword. “I won’t let you come to harm.”

Cole silently wished the Halfknight was a little taller.

They waited. Beyond the open gate, Cole watched tendrils of mist flow like lethargic snakes across the scabby road. Turning to look back down the Red Road, he could see nobody approaching.

“I’m going in,” Jace informed them with a nod toward the gate.

“No, you’re not,” Mira replied.

“What else are we supposed to do?” Jace asked. “The torivor isn’t sending anyone.”

“We don’t just go rushing onto his property,” Mira said.

“He opened the gate,” Jace said. “It’s an invitation.”

“According to the stories, Trillian is a powerful enchanter,” Skye said. “He was locked up for good reason. If we enter his prison, we’ll be subject to his power.”

“*We* won’t be going anywhere,” Jace said. “Just me. I’ll check it out. Trillian opened the door. He knows I’m here. We want to talk with him. This is our chance to find out about Honor. I’ll come back and let you know how it goes. If I don’t come back, you’ll know the bargaining will be tricky.”

“I should go,” Twitch blurted. “If they close the gate, I have a chance of jumping the fence.”

“No,” Jace said. “If this torivor is half as powerful as everybody says, you won’t get away from him because you have wings. He’ll either let me come back or he won’t. Same with any of us. I’m the one who stepped onto the road. It makes sense that I keep going.”

“Jace, don’t,” Mira said. “Honor is my sister. I should take the risk.”

“If she goes, I go too,” Minimus said staunchly.

Jace gave Mira a lopsided smile. “You’re too valuable to risk, Mira. The torivor wanted your sister, so he’ll probably want you, too. He may not care about keeping me.”

“He may not care about killing you,” Cole said.

“It’s okay,” Jace said calmly. “I’ve felt useless since we left Sambria. At least this is something I can do. It’s just another sky castle to survive.”

“You don’t have your rope,” Mira said.

“I made it through my first missions without it.” Jace started walking toward the open gate.

“Be careful,” Skye said, her voice quavering.

Jace paused where the Red Road became black beyond the fence line. Cole held his breath. He had a sick feeling the next step could be the end of his friend. He wanted to call out for him to stop. Hands over her mouth, Mira looked away, but her eyes were promptly drawn back.

Jace glanced at Mira and gave a casual salute, then stepped forward.

And vanished.

Cole looked to Skye. “What happened?”

“Hard to say,” Skye replied. “There are powerful enchantments here. I can sense the energy. Everything we see could be a seeming. Or maybe I’m sensing the enchantments that imprison the torivor. We can only wait and see if Jace returns.”

“That was really brave,” Dalton said.

“Jace has no shortage of courage,” Mira replied.

Cole picked up a pebble. Approaching the fence without stepping onto the Red Road, he tossed the pebble underhand through the open gate. The stone disappeared as soon as it crossed the fence line.

“I think it’s an illusion,” Cole said. “I think he’s okay. We just can’t see him.”

“Either that, or everything that enters gets vaporized,” Twitch said.

Mira glared at him.

“What?” Twitch exclaimed defensively. “It’s one or the other. We were all thinking it.”

“What’s our next move if Jace doesn’t return?” Dalton asked.

“I’m going after him,” Mira answered.

“You mustn’t hand yourself over to Trillian,” Skye said. “Without a daughter of the High King, the revolution is doomed. I’ll go in before you will.”

Jace stepped out from the open gate onto the Red Road, seemingly materializing out of nothing. “Hey,” he said.

“What happened?” Mira asked.

“The torivor wants all of you to step onto the Red Road,” Jace said. “Unless you do, there won’t be any bargaining.”

“You talked to him?” Skye asked.

“No,” Jace said. “One of his servants. I’m not supposed to explain.” He turned and walked back through the gate, vanishing.

Mira stepped onto the road. “Come on,” she said to the others. “This is why we came.”

“Or this is how he’ll destroy us all at once,” Twitch murmured.

“His servants can probably attack us whenever he wants,” Mira said.

“At least Trillian seems willing to talk,” Skye said. “I wasn’t sure we could hope for that much.”

Cole walked onto the Red Road, as did the others. There was no sensation to indicate the road was magical or had any effect on them. Cole noticed that Twitch stayed near the edge of the road, one foot on the curb, slightly crouched, ready to jump. They waited tensely.

Jace returned. “The torivor wants Cole and Mira to enter with me.”

“Do you think they should?” Skye asked.

“I’m not supposed to give details,” Jace said slowly. “But who cares? I think it would be stupid for Mira to come. It looks beautiful once you step through. It might all be an illusion, and it could absolutely be a trap.”

“I’m coming,” Mira said, walking toward the open gates.

“No,” Cole said, grabbing her wrist. “We don’t have to give this guy everything he wants. I’ll go. You stay.”

“But—” Mira began to protest.

“You have to stay back,” Cole insisted. “What if getting you is all he cares about? We won’t have any room to bargain.”

“There’s no telling what the torivor might want in exchange for Honor,” Skye said. “But, Mira, Cole is right. Putting yourself in his power will only weaken our position.”

Mira paused. The reasoning seemed to sink in. “You may be right.”

Jace folded his arms. “Cole, if you’re coming, we should go. They’re waiting.”

Stomach fluttering, Cole walked to where the Red Road ended. He glanced over at Jace. “Why me?”

“They didn’t explain,” Jace said. He stepped forward, vanishing.



Cole looked back at Mira and nodded. He waved at Twitch and shared a look with Dalton. Then he stepped forward.

The sensation was like passing through a membrane made of static electricity. It was only vaguely tangible, but left the hair on his arms standing up.

The scene before him changed dramatically. The Red Road extended before him, its color so rich and vibrant that Cole felt he was seeing true red for the first time. The grounds around the keep were now composed mostly of huge crystals streaked with veins of light. Elegant groves of trees huddled around clear ponds. A flock of birds wheeled overhead in synchronization, as large and bright as kites. The castle had changed into a gleaming monument of pearl and platinum.

Three figures confronted him. A woman sat astride a chestnut stallion as broad and beefy as a bull. Her hair was like molten silver, and her beauty so flawless that she seemed more a work of art than a person. Two brawny men stood on the ground near her, clad in snug, cunning armor made from overlapping rings of varied size. The men carried long halberds with elaborate heads, and the woman wore a dagger at her slender waist.

“Where is Mira?” the woman asked, her voice clear and resonant.

“She’s not coming,” Cole said.

The woman closed her eyes for a moment. “This does not please us.”

“She sent me to hear what the torivor wants,” Cole said.

The woman threw her head back and laughed. It sounded so mirthful and genuine that Cole had to resist joining in. “Does she imagine herself safer than you where she now stands?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” Cole said. “Who are you to boss her around?”

“I have authority to speak on Trillian’s behalf,” the woman said.

“And I can speak for Mira,” Cole replied.

“Can you really?” the woman asked.

“That’s why she sent me,” Cole said.

The woman closed her eyes for a moment. “True enough, I suppose. Very well, follow me. My master will see you.”

She turned her horse and started walking along the Red Road toward the glistening keep. The men fell into step behind her.

Cole glanced at Jace, who shrugged. They looked back at the fence. Beyond it, all was impenetrable blackness.

“Does Jace have to come?” Cole asked.

“Both of you,” the woman said, not looking back.

Cole walked to the side of the road, crouched, and tried to pick up one of the smaller crystals. Most of them were anchored to one another, but after a moment he found a loose one. He turned and prepared to throw it out through the open gate.

“Don’t toss it,” the woman said. “And don’t dally.”

Cole looked over at Jace, who glanced toward the fence and gave a nod. Cole winged the crystal sidearm. Just before it reached the blackness beyond the gate, one of the guards appeared and caught it.

“Did he just teleport?” Cole muttered to Jace.

“He’s got some skills,” Jace murmured back.

The guard gestured with his halberd for Cole to follow the woman and the other guard. Cole and Jace obeyed.

The woman continued ahead of them on her muscular steed, with one of the guards flanking her. The other guard followed behind them. Craning his neck back, Cole saw that the sky was a swirling cloud of opalescent light. He observed no sun or moon or other specific light source, yet the whole area was quite bright. Light glowed down from above, out of the crystals, and from the very air itself.

“What’s your name?” Cole called to the woman.

“I am Hina,” she replied, not looking back.

“Have you lived here long?” he asked.

“Save your questions for Trillian,” she replied.

The Red Road ended at a cascade of steps leading down from the mirrored doors to the palace. Hina dismounted, and the guard took the reins of her horse. “Follow me,” she instructed.

Hina swept up the steps to the castle door, which opened at her touch. Cole hurried in order to stay close. The inside of the castle shone like the

outside. They passed through minimally furnished chambers of pure white marble and chromium. All surfaces appeared smooth and highly polished. Glowing crystals of odd shapes and sizes served as decorations. Everything was so clean and white that Cole couldn't decide whether it looked more like heaven or a fancy insane asylum.

After a climb up a long staircase, Hina indicated a door to Cole. "You may await my master here," she said. "You will not be able to leave this room unless he allows it."

Cole reached for the doorknob, and Jace moved to follow, but Hina placed a hand on Jace's shoulder. "I have a separate room for you."

Cole and Jace shared an uncomfortable look. "Can we stay together?" Cole asked.

"You cannot," Hina said.

"Their house, their rules," Jace said.

Cole went through the door, and it promptly closed behind him. A smooth, white floor sloped up into smooth, white walls that curved into a smooth, white ceiling. The room lacked edges or corners. A low, crystal table sat surrounded by cushions instead of chairs. A large round bed filled one side of the room. Billowy pillows topped the silky white sheets.

Cole crossed the room to a small window on the far side. Looking out, he had a bird's-eye view of the crystalline grounds around the castle, as well as the towering wall of blackness that prevented any view beyond the outer fence. It looked like somebody had carved a glittering kingdom out of dark nothingness.

Cole sat on a cushion by the table. The crystal surface felt cool against his palms. He wondered how long the torivor would make him wait. Would Trillian come to his room or summon him? What was a torivor, anyhow? What if he looked like a giant spider? Or a gooey slug? Would he speak Cole's language? Was Trillian already talking with Jace?

As time passed, Cole became drowsy. There wasn't much to do in the bare room. He wandered over to the bed and tried it out. He couldn't believe how soft it was! He laid down and sank into a cool comfort like he had never experienced. Despite how yielding the mattress felt, he didn't end up in an

awkward position that might lead to a kinked neck. It was less like lying and more like floating.

The comfort of the bed begged him to sleep. His eyes felt heavy. How would the torivor react if he entered to find him dozing? But what else was he supposed to do? Sit at an empty table? Trillian had given him a room with a bed. Why not steal a little nap? His sleep lately had been on the ground or in rickety cots. This bed was more relaxing than any he had ever known. It would be a crime to waste it.

Some part of him warned that he shouldn't let his guard down in an enemy castle. But that objection stayed remote, a concern of the waking world. Effortlessly, Cole slipped into the embrace of dreams.

## CHAPTER

# 28

## TRILLIAN

**C**ole stood in a posh chamber. Full of warmth and color, it was less sterile than other rooms in the castle. Precious metals and deep-blue stones decorated the floor in an elaborate pattern. Thick wooden beams added character to the walls and ceiling. Fine paintings and tapestries hung in abundance. The center of the room featured a generously open space, but the perimeter had furniture of exotic shapes and materials.

Cole failed to notice the man until he moved. His age was difficult to gauge, somewhere between a young man and a grandfather. He wore a loose golden robe with fur on the collar and at the end of the sleeves. He seemed a product of many ethnicities, with Asian the most prominent among them. Light suffused his skin, as if his entire body gently glowed from within. The man walked slowly, almost carefully, all the while regarding Cole with penetrating eyes and a cryptic smile.

“Hi,” Cole said. “How did I get here?”

“Think back to your arrival,” the man suggested. Cole heard the words with his ears, but also in his mind, as if the message might have arrived even with his ears covered.

“I’m asleep,” Cole said, recalling the bed.

“I’ve been waiting,” the man answered simply.

“You’re Trillian,” Cole realized.

The man gave a slight bow. “I have that honor. And you are Cole Randolph.”

Cole felt some relief that Trillian didn’t look like a giant spider. He was also glad that he seemed polite. “This doesn’t feel like a dream,” Cole said. “I feel awake. This room almost seems more real than the room I was in.”

“Perhaps it is more real,” Trillian said.

“But it’s a dream,” Cole replied.

“Must a dream be less real than the waking world?” Trillian asked.

“Dreams go away when you wake up,” Cole said, confident in his answer.

“Must something be permanent to be real?” Trillian asked. “You dwell in a temporary reality. Everything you know will end one day—your body, your possessions, the entire world where you were born will one day cease to exist as it presently does. Does that mean your life has not been real?”

“I guess it will all end someday,” Cole conceded. “But it lasts longer than a dream.”

“Does it?” Trillian asked. “Dreams sustain many through their entire lives. For some, dreams are their most personal and permanent possessions. The world I come from is much more like a dream than what you consider reality. My world existed long before your world, Cole, and it will endure long after your world crumbles. Mine is an eternal world, and I am an eternal being.”

“You’ve lived forever?” Cole asked incredulously.

“Time is irrelevant where I come from,” Trillian said. “I have always existed, which means I truly exist.”

“Are you saying I don’t exist?” Cole asked, ready to argue.

“On the contrary,” Trillian said. “Your current state will end, but part of you is eternal and will move on to other states of being after your body dies. That part of you exists as much as I do.”

“You mean I’ll go to heaven?” Cole asked.

“Those specifics are beyond my view,” Trillian answered. “But there is more to reality than you presently understand. There are circumstances when a conversation in a dream can leave a deeper impression than a conversation in the waking world. This is one such circumstance.”

Trillian waved a hand, and the walls and ceiling fell away. The room reformed into a small ship. They sailed on calm, turquoise waters, a mountainous jungle coast in view on one side, distant islands barely visible on the other.

“See,” Cole said. “Dreams change too easily.”

“Do you not hear the water lapping against the bow?” Trillian asked. “Do you not feel the breeze on your face? Smell the salt in the air? Is your mind foggy? Is the experience dulled in any way?”

“It seems very real, and I feel awake,” Cole admitted. “The illusions enchanters make seem real too.”

“Who is to say they are not real?” Trillian asked.

“Me,” Cole replied, “when I walk through them.”

“I see,” Trillian said. “Things must be tangible to be real. Light is not real. Neither is knowledge. Neither is love.”

Cole gave an exasperated sigh. “You’re saying dreams and illusions are real?”

“Nothing matters more than what happens in our minds,” Trillian said. “Your experiences in what you consider your real life in the real world only exist in your mind and in the minds of others. The mind is everything. And dreams are the playground of the mind.”

“Your world is a dream?” Cole asked doubtfully.

“It’s the best comparison I can give you,” Trillian said. “When you want to change something in what you consider to be the real world, you must first think the matter through and make a decision, then you physically take action. When I want to make a change in my home world, I simply exert my will. The shaping here is like a dim shadow of what I could accomplish where I come from.”

“I heard you were a shaper,” Cole said.

Trillian waved his arm. The boat was gone. They stood in a warm, humid greenhouse with a roof and walls of glass. The air smelled of fresh leaves and blossoms. Beyond the windows stretched a snowy expanse of tundra.

“I am *the* shaper,” Trillian said. “Where I come from, shaping is a way of life, as intuitive and natural as breathing is to you.”

“Where is Jace?” Cole wondered.

“He’ll be along later,” Trillian said. “For now I would prefer to keep this between the two of us.”

“I’m a little surprised you speak English,” Cole said.

Trillian laughed. “You should not be surprised. Have you ever met somebody in the Outskirts who did not speak your language?”

“No,” Cole said. Some people had accents, but everyone he had met spoke English.

“In the Outskirts, we all hear our native languages,” Trillian said. “It takes great effort not to be understood here. I know why you came to me.”

“You do?” Cole asked.

“You hope to take Honor away from here,” Trillian said.

“Did Jace tell you?”

“You’re scrambling for the best arguments to use,” Trillian said. “Don’t bother, child. Assume I know everything that you know. I know about Morgassa and the threat that she poses. I know what Stafford did to his daughters. I know about the shapecrafters and Jenna and your family back home in Mesa.”

“How do you know all that?” Cole asked, feeling off-balance.

Trillian smiled. “This is a meeting of minds. Yours is open to me. It opened as soon as you entered my domain.”

“You can read my mind?” Cole asked.

“Effortlessly,” Trillian said. “Where I come from, there is no verbalization. Not like here. All communication is mind to mind. There are no secrets. No lies. Cole, I know details about you that you have long forgotten—places, events, people. Also things you have not recognized or refuse to admit. Please feel free to speak openly. You can hide nothing from me.”

Cole hated the thought of anyone poking around inside his mind. What embarrassing things had Trillian seen? All the selfish, cowardly thoughts. All his fears. Every daydream about Jenna. All on display.

“The brave thoughts, too,” Trillian said. “The fond memories. The good intentions. Not to mention the hidden power.”



“What can you see about my power?” Cole asked, genuinely curious. He had begun to doubt whether it was really there.

“It’s there,” Trillian assured him. “And it’s significant. Your power is much more interesting than Mira’s or Honor’s. Their gifts are not small, but yours is unique. Under other circumstances, I would endeavor to unlock that potential.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked.

“I have trained all the Ellowine enchanters of any consequence over the past several centuries, including the Grand Shaper Callista. You would be a fascinating pupil.”

Cole remembered the warnings about Trillian from Skye. He was evil and had been trapped here for years. Why would he help train shapers? Was he telling the truth? Was he just acting courteous and reasonable until he sprang his trap?

“Go ahead,” Trillian said, his eyes grave. “Ask me.”

Cole wasn’t sure how exactly to put it. “Why? You know what I’m thinking.”

“We’re having a conversation,” Trillian said. “Ask me.”

“You’re a prisoner here,” Cole said. “Aren’t you dangerous? Why would people let you train them?”

“I am extremely powerful,” Trillian said. “Dangerous? I suppose that accompanies power. If I had come to the Outskirts today, I would rule unchallenged. But as fortune had it, when I arrived, there were some shapers of astonishing might here, including some who helped frame the different kingdoms. I wielded great power, but this place was different from my world, and before I could master using my abilities here, they had me.”

“Are there others like you?” Cole asked.

“Many,” Trillian said. “An entire world of us. Only one other torivor journeyed here with me. Ramarro. He must have been captured as well, or else he would be ruling. I could not perceive his fate after I was caught, and those I sent abroad found no trace of him. I cannot see beyond my prison, except dimly on the Red Road. What I know I learn from my traveling servants or from people who come here, like you have today.”

“Why haven’t other torivors come?” Cole asked.

“The shapers who imprisoned me sealed the way to my world,” Trillian said. “I do not expect others of my kind to find their way here in the foreseeable future.”

“Why’d they imprison you?” Cole asked. “Did you attack the shapers?”

“I interacted with them,” Trillian said. “Some of them tested themselves against me. They feared my power. Hostility erupted. They tried to harm me. I fought back. They couldn’t kill me, but they did imprison me.”

“You can’t get free?” Cole asked.

“Not for lack of trying. The shapers knew their craft. They not only shaped a prison to hold me. They shaped me. I am not as you see me now. I am bound deep beneath this place. But my power remains active inside my domain.”

Cole wondered how much of what he was hearing was true.

“I cannot lie,” Trillian said. “I can mislead, or evade questions, but I only speak the truth. It is more than a matter of honor. It is an essential part of what I am, where my power comes from. If I lied, I would be undone. If you could perceive my true nature, you would see that it is so.”

“If they hadn’t imprisoned you, would you have taken over the Outskirts?” Cole asked, testing his honesty.

“Yes,” Trillian answered. “I would have bound the other torivor and ruled unthreatened until the end of this place or until I chose to move on. I would have reshaped this entire realm into a paradise. All who served me would have prospered under my rule. You suspect I’m telling you this because I want you to free me. Rest assured, you lack the ability to release me.”

“If you got free, what would you do?” Cole asked.

“I would rule as the highest shaper the Outskirts has known,” Trillian said. “Any who opposed me would fall. I would remake the boundaries between the kingdoms. I would unlock the true potential of this realm between realms.”

“The boundaries between the kingdoms can be changed?” Cole wondered.

“You glimpsed this when you used the Jumping Sword against the Rogue Knight. Others have tested the possibilities as well. There have not always

been five kingdoms, nor have mortals always dwelled here. The five kingdoms were made. They could be remade.”

Cole tried to imagine what it would be like if Trillian got free. Would the people come to accept him as their king? Could it be a good thing? With the kind of power he was describing, he would be a dictator. It mostly depended on whether he was really good or not.

“I would be demanding, but I could also make life easier in many ways,” Trillian said. “I confess that I have no deep love for mortals. You’re all so fleeting, though a number of you intrigue me. I would not be your servant. Your genie. You would serve me and work to make the Outskirts the paradise that I envision. A higher mind would govern you. Some people would resent me, and I might toy with them. I crave a measure of revenge for my incarceration. I cannot predict for certain how much you would enjoy my rule. I come from an eternal realm where I dwelt among equals. Here, I would be in a temporal realm, ruling over lesser beings.”

“Why come here?” Cole asked.

“To varying degrees, all torivors feel the call to move beyond our home world,” he said. “Life there is perfect, except for a certain . . . sameness. I am not the first to depart. Leaving eternity to enter time changed my very existence. Sequence became relevant—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In a realm of beginnings and endings, I could die. What happens to an eternal being who dies in a temporal reality? Would I be erased? Or would some part of me journey on?”

“You said I would live on,” Cole said.

“Part of you will, yes,” Trillian said. “I can see that plainly. But can you recognize it in yourself?”

“Not really,” Cole said. “I hope it’s true.”

“I see the eternal component in you, but I can’t perceive anything in myself besides what I am here and now. I would not want to risk dying here. If I found my life in jeopardy, I would rather return home.”

“But for now you’re stuck,” Cole said.

“Indeed,” Trillian replied. “You’re stuck here too.”

“I want to find my friends and get home,” Cole admitted. “We never meant to come here.”

“I know.”

“Do you know where I can find Jenna?”

“No.”

“Could you find out?”

“Probably. It would take time. But I have no interest in learning her whereabouts. That problem is yours to solve.”

“Is there . . . ,” Cole began, but he got choked up. The question mattered too much to him to finish it.

“. . . a way for you to get home?” Trillian supplied. “Not if you want to stay there. Not the way things are currently arranged.”

“Could they be rearranged?” Cole asked.

“Somebody with enough power could do it,” Trillian said.

“You?”

“Certainly, if I were free. Others, perhaps.”

“Who?” Cole asked.

Trillian waved a dismissive hand. “Enough irrelevant trivia.”

Cole wanted to press the torivor for more information, but he could tell Trillian was done with the subject. At least he knew there was a way! He couldn't wait to tell Dalton.

“You already know what we came here for,” Cole said. “There isn't much for me to say. Are you going to help us?”

Trillian smiled. “That question has burned in you since our conversation started. Though I can see your mind, Cole, there remains an element of mystery to you. It's the main principle that keeps you mortals interesting. Your past is clear to me, as are your present thoughts, but I can't be sure what you will choose tomorrow. I don't know how you might react to new information. I don't know because you don't know. I can guess, but I can't be sure. You temporal beings are capable of shocking change. Your opinions and attitudes evolve. You lie to yourselves. Your emotions fluctuate. These concepts are foreign to me. I see countless examples in your memory, but I don't expect to ever truly understand your fundamental nature.”

“You don’t change?” Cole asked.

“Not really,” Trillian said. “At least not in my home world. In this temporal state, there may be unexplored possibilities. But in any state I cannot deceive myself. Who I am and what I want are in agreement.”

“What are you trying to guess about me?” Cole said. “Do you have an offer?”

“I take an interest in the five kingdoms. I will not be locked away forever. This world had a beginning, and so it will come to an end. But my time here is tedious. I enjoy influencing this realm through the people I train and send abroad.”

“You want me to do something?” Cole asked.

Trillian waved an arm, and they stood on a circular platform high in the sky. A large white moon gave light. Stars sparkled above. Cool air wafted around them.

As the platform began to descend, Trillian walked to the edge. There was no railing. Cole followed carefully and peered down.

Far below, in the distance, a town was under attack. Tiny people ran from a numberless mob of other tiny people.

“The threat from Morgassa and her horde is real,” Trillian said heavily. “These images came to me last week from one of my winged servants. The situation perturbs me. Peculiar elements are at play. Someone unleashed powers that they cannot control. I have sent out many scouts to investigate the problem. Thanks to your conversation with the soldier who witnessed the horde up close, you have better clarified the situation than the few servants who returned with far-removed visions like this one.”

“Honor can help us stop Morgassa,” Cole said.

Trillian stared at him silently. The torivor waved a hand, and they were back in the warm room with the fancy floor and the exotic furniture.

“Unchecked, Morgassa will overrun Elloweer within a month,” Trillian said. “I do not wish to see Elloweer destroyed. A live kingdom is a more interesting place to be imprisoned than a dead one.”

“What if Morgassa came here?” Cole asked.

Trillian tapped a finger against his cheek. "I'm not certain. Her strengths differ from mine. Even here, she could pose a threat to me. It would not be a dull contest."

"Why not give us Honor and let us go after Morgassa?"

Trillian tilted his head. "Might you succeed? Possibly. Time to bring in your friend." Trillian clapped, and Jace appeared. Jace looked over at Cole, surprised.

"This is Trillian," Cole said. "We're dreaming."

"I know," Jace said. "I've been talking to him."

"I've been speaking to each of you separately," Trillian said. "Time to confer together. You both want Honor. As does Mira. I brought Honor here for my own reasons. Given the threat posed by Morgassa, I am not entirely unwilling to let her go. But I will not make her a free gift. Such a prize must be earned, and I love contests."

"Why not just help us?" Cole cried.

"Giving you a chance is help enough," Trillian said. "You, Jace, and Mira must participate in the contest together, or we have no deal. If you win, Honor leaves with you. If I win, you all belong to me."

"Leave Mira out of it," Jace said.

"No," Trillian said. "Cole will go fetch her. If he doesn't return with her, he should not return at all. I asked to see all three of you, and you ignored my request. It's time to heed me. You're worried that the contest will be impossible to win. It will be difficult, but possible. If you had no chance of success, there would be no sport in it."

"Why did you bring Honor here?" Cole asked.

"Bring Mira," Trillian said. "That is all."

The torivor waved a hand, and Cole opened his eyes. He was on the circular white bed in the small room without corners. No sleepiness lingered. The door stood open, and Hina was waiting.

## CHAPTER

# 29

## CONTEST

**C**ole found Mira, Dalton, Twitch, Skye, and Minimus waiting on the Red Road just outside the gates. Mira and Dalton ran to him as soon as he appeared. They looked anxious and relieved.

“Are you all right?” Mira asked.

“I’m okay,” Cole said. He felt reluctant to deliver the message from Trillian.

“You were gone for hours,” Twitch said.

“What happened?” Dalton asked.

“Where’s Jace?” Mira wondered.

“The torivor has Jace,” Cole said. “We talked to him.”

“What’s he like?” Skye asked.

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “He visited me in a dream. He’s from another world, but in the dream he looked human. He has a pretty high opinion of himself. He could read my mind.” Cole glanced back at the desolate view of the skeletal castle through the fence. “That place looks a lot different from the inside. Maybe what we see from here is a seeming. Maybe it’s all a big seeming once you go through the gates.”

“How scary is he?” Dalton asked.

“He’s not like a giant scorpipede,” Cole said. “He’s scary because he’s smart and really powerful. He can get inside your head. He knows a lot. He said it might be possible for us to get back home. Our hopes might not be completely crazy!”

“Are you serious?” Dalton’s eyes lit up. “Where do we go? What do we do?”

“He wouldn’t explain how, but he told me somebody with enough power could change how it all works—could fix things so we could get home and stay there.”

“Cole, that’s wonderful news,” Mira said. “And did you see Honor?” she asked, not quite keeping her voice steady.

“No,” Cole said, deflating a bit. “I’m sorry, I didn’t. Trillian has her, though—definitely. He says he’ll give her to us if we win a contest.”

“What kind of contest?” Dalton asked.

“He didn’t really explain,” Cole replied. “Jace, Mira, and I have to do it together. All he promised is that we’d have a chance to win.”

“And if we lose?” Mira asked.

“He keeps us,” Cole said. “Like he’s keeping Honor.”

“Meanwhile he’s holding Jace hostage?” Mira asked.

“Pretty much,” Cole said.

Mira tossed up her hands. “I have to try.”

Skye stepped forward. “Are you sure? Without any daughters of the High King, the revolution doesn’t stand a chance.”

Mira shrugged. “I have three other sisters. Without Honor, Elloweer is doomed. I’m not going to abandon my sister if there is a chance of saving her.”

“Then I must insist on accompanying you,” Minimus spoke up. “The Rogue Knight left you in my care.”

“I don’t think you’re invited,” Cole said. “Trillian made it clear the contest is for me, Jace, and Mira alone.”

“The best way to protect me might be letting me go with Cole,” Mira said. “We don’t want to cross Trillian. We’re lucky he’s willing to give us a chance.”



“It might not be much of a chance,” Twitch said. “How do you know the torivor isn’t lying about the contest to get you to come to him? He may not let any of you go.”

“He said he never lies,” Cole said. “Of course, that could be a lie.”

“I’m willing to risk it,” Mira said. “How about you, Cole?”

Cole closed his eyes and tapped his forehead with his fists. He wasn’t sure what they should do, but Mira needed his take at least. “I don’t know,” Cole said, opening his eyes. “I think it’s a real contest. Of course, that could be what the torivor wants me to think. Trillian seems really smart. He was almost polite. He seems bored. He said he wanted to give us a sporting chance. I believe he meant it, but I have no idea how bad this whole contest thing will actually be. It could be a nightmare. But we can’t just leave Jace in there. Honor either. It’s up to you, Mira. If you’re in, I’m with you.”

“Let’s go,” Mira said, walking toward the open gate.

“If you’re not back in a day, I’ll come for you,” Minimus pledged.

“That’s up to you,” Mira said. “Nobody has to come after us. I doubt it would do any good. Hopefully, we’ll see you soon.”

Cole and Dalton tapped knuckles.

“Be careful,” Dalton said. He looked worried.

Cole put an arm around his friend. “Promise me something.”

“Sure,” Dalton said.

“If I don’t make it back, find Jenna. Help her. Don’t give up until you’re home.”

“Okay,” Dalton said thickly.

Cole looked at Twitch. “And you save your village.”

“Will do,” Twitch replied.

“You ready?” Mira asked, standing where the Red Road ended.

Cole slapped the Jumping Sword at his side. “Nope. But let’s go.”

He crossed to her, and they stepped through together. Hina and two guards awaited them on the far side, beside a fancy coach glittering with gemstones. A harness of red leather and gold connected six white horses to the vehicle.

“Welcome, Miracle Pemberton,” Hina said. She made a gesture, and one of the guards opened the door to the coach.

“Where was this for me?” Cole complained.

“You’re not royalty,” Hina responded.

Cole glanced at Mira, who was taking in the glorious surroundings with astonished eyes. “That woman is beautiful,” Mira whispered.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “We had to walk last time.”

Mira led the way to the coach and climbed in. Cole followed her quickly, a little worried they might deny him permission to join her. Hina rode her beefy horse while the guards drove the coach. The crystalline landscape flashed by as the coach whooshed along the redder than red road.

They stopped at the ethereal palace, and Hina led them inside. She guided them up some glossy stairs and stopped outside of an ornate door. “Here is a room for you, Miracle,” Hina said with a slight bow.

“Let me guess,” Cole said. “It’s nicer than mine?”

Mira shot him a wink. Hina ignored him.

“Go to sleep,” Cole told her. “See you in Dreamland.”

Mira went inside, and Hina closed the door.

“You should treat a princess with greater courtesy,” Hina said.

“Like by trapping one in a castle?” Cole replied.

Unruffled, she led him to another door and indicated it. “You may stay in here.”

The room was similar to his previous one. After the door was shut, Cole went straight to the bed. He wondered how long it would take to sleep. The bed was luxuriously comfy, but he didn’t feel tired, so he stared at the ceiling.

Cole wondered what sort of contest they would face. Would it involve fighting? Would it be something intellectual, like riddles or trivia? Could it be a game of chance, like playing poker or something? He made himself smile as he pictured himself and Jace competing against Trillian and Mira in a three-legged race.

After some time, a strong sense of drowsiness washed over him. The sensation was too sudden to be natural, but he didn’t try to fight it. He closed his eyes and effortlessly fell asleep.

He was back in the room with the fancy floor and the exotic furniture. Standing with his hands behind his back, Trillian greeted him with a nod. Mira and Jace were there as well.

“Welcome, Cole and Jace,” Trillian said.

“Are you all right?” Jace asked Mira.

“I’ve been better,” she said.

“Miracle Pemberton could one day be High Queen of the Outskirts,” Trillian said. “Of course, there are obstacles, three of them being her elder sisters Elegance, Honor, and Constance. Another is her father, who pretended to kill her and her siblings and probably wishes to kill her in truth now that he retains no portion of her shaping power.”

“I never wanted to be High Queen,” Mira said. “Elegance can have it.”

“This is true,” Trillian said. “You view your royal heritage as an unwelcome burden, the source of most of the trouble in your life.”

“I’ve lived my life on the run,” Mira said. “I’ve watched people around me die. Even back in Junction City, life was never easy.”

“No life is easy,” Trillian said. “I’ll grant that yours has been uncommonly challenging. Some of that has been self-inflicted. I understand you’re here to help rescue one of your rivals to the throne.”

“Honor is not my rival,” Mira said.

“If not for her father, Elegance would be High Queen,” Trillian said. “Without Stafford and Elegance, the title would go to Honor. And what a queen she would make! She has a great deal of spirit.”

“I’m sure you’ve spent time in her mind,” Mira said.

“I offered to train her, but she refused,” Trillian said. “If Honor regains her power, she could become a formidable enchantress.”

“I want to see her,” Mira said.

“I’m about to provide that opportunity,” Trillian said. “If you can find her, you need only touch her, say her name, and not only will you be reunited, but you will be free to go.”

“That sounds easy,” Mira said.

“She may not look quite like herself,” Trillian said.

“What have you done to her?” Mira demanded.

The torivor smiled. "I've . . . adjusted her."

"How?" Mira asked, heat in her tone.

Trillian pointed at her. "That is up to you to figure out. I reserve the right to alter her more as the contest progresses. Each of you gets one chance to touch something and say, 'Honor.' I've prepared three locations for you to search. Cole will guess in the first location, then Jace, and finally Mira. Feel free to work together deciding."

"She could be anything?" Cole said.

"Anything alive," Trillian said. "No plants. Just animals, including humans. I have customized a seeming to prevent her from recognizing Mira or perceiving your true forms. To her ears, your voices will be scrambled if you ask about her identity, try to reveal your identities, or mention anything about this contest. Honor has no idea what you're doing."

"What happens if we guess wrong?" Jace asked.

"Each incorrect guess moves you to the next location," Trillian said. "If you miss all three guesses, you belong to me. To motivate you to keep the guesses coming, each location has a threat. While you hunt for Honor, something will also hunt you. Each threat will endeavor to kill all of you. Should any of you die before your guess is used, that guess is lost. Naturally, if all of you die, the contest ends."

Cole felt betrayed. The torivor had failed to mention that the contest might kill them. He had acted like at worst they would be his prisoners. Cole glanced at Mira, feeling horrible for dragging her into this. "You never told us we might die," Cole objected.

"I'm telling you now," Trillian said. "Our lives are always at risk. If a threat gets too close, use a guess and move to the next location. You'll have ample opportunity to survive."

"What if we refuse to play?" Mira asked.

"My gate is now closed," Trillian said. "This contest is the only way any of you leave."

"Will it happen here?" Cole asked. "In this dream?"

Trillian chuckled. "No, you'll awaken for the contest. It will occur outside of my palace. When you exit to the grounds, the game will begin."

“Will it all be an illusion?” Cole wondered.

Trillian shook his head. “I’ll accomplish most of it with changings, large and small. Every element of the contest will be perfectly tangible. My shaping abilities are unlike any in the five kingdoms. Let me worry about how it will be accomplished. Concentrate on winning.”

“Do you want us to lose?” Mira asked.

“Not particularly,” Trillian said. “Most likely you will fail. The contest will be difficult, but it is not rigged. You can win. And if you do, I will set you free, as promised. I’m eager to see how you perform.”

“When do we start?” Mira asked.

Trillian clapped his hands.

Cole opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. The door to his room opened to reveal Hina out in the hall. “Time to go,” she said.

He followed her to a neighboring door, where she summoned Jace. Once he was with them, they went and got Mira. She fell into step with Jace and Cole behind Hina.

“What are you, Hina?” Cole asked. “Are you a seeming? Like a figment? Or a semblance?”

“I’m a woman of Elloweer,” Hina said. “I’ve served Trillian for many years.”

“You don’t look very old,” Mira said.

“It’s an advantage of dwelling here,” Hina said. “If you three survive the trial, you might join us.”

“I’ve been this age for long enough,” Mira said.

Hina led them to the front door of the castle. “Here we are,” she said, reaching for the handle to open it. “Let the games begin.”

## CHAPTER

# 30

## THE PEMBERTONS

**F**ingers on the handle, Hina looked to Mira.

“Ready?” Mira asked the boys.

“Die bravely,” Jace said.

“Here we go again,” Cole muttered.

Mira gave a nod, and Hina opened the door.

They stepped out into the courtyard of a castle. It looked nothing like either version of the Lost Palace that Cole had seen previously—neither decrepit and burned nor gleaming like pearls.

This castle was huge. Only one side of it was presently visible, but a massive wall topped with walkways and towers enclosed the expansive courtyard. The side of the castle Cole could see was broad and solid, rising through multiple levels of battlements, balconies, and turrets to the highest towers. Guards in immaculate uniforms stood on the walls and around the perimeter of the courtyard.

“Mira, hurry up,” called a woman from farther out in the courtyard. Tall and graceful, she had auburn hair and a playful expression. Beside her stood a young woman, equally tall and if anything more lovely. Her hair was a shade darker, and she wore combs in it. A younger, shorter girl had long straight hair and a bored expression. She stood with her arms folded and looked a year

or two older than Cole. The youngest of the group had to be a couple of years younger than Cole. She wore a plain dress with an apron and had dark, soulful eyes.

Mira gave a little gasp. “No, no, no,” she whispered.

With a start, Cole saw that Mira had long hair and wore an elegant dress. He and Jace were dressed nicely as well.

Suddenly, Cole realized what he was seeing. The women and girls looking toward Mira all bore a resemblance to her. They had to be her mother and her sisters!

“Hurry up,” the eldest daughter said. “It’ll take all of us to convince Honor to come.”

“One moment,” Mira called. She turned to Cole and Jace. Cole didn’t think he had ever seen her look so rattled. She wiped her eyes with trembling fingers.

“It’s your family,” Cole said.

Mira nodded, saying nothing. “I mean, it isn’t really them,” she said, as if trying to convince herself. “But, you know, it all looks perfect.”

“That’s your mom?” Jace asked.

“My mother and sisters,” Mira confirmed, getting a little more control over herself. “Queen Harmony, Ella, Costa, and Tessa. Call Mother ‘my queen.’ It’s the day we were supposed to go to the Fall Festival in Lindenwood. The day Father staged our deaths.”

“Tell your friends you have to go, dearest,” Harmony called.

“They’re joining me until we leave,” Mira called back.

Costa glanced at Ella. “You want better company than us?”

“I like that one,” Tessa said, pointing at Jace. “He’ll protect us.”

“All right,” Harmony said. “Come along.”

Mira’s family waited while Mira, Cole, and Jace hurried over to them. Staring off into the distance, Ella showed no interest in their arrival.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Harmony said to the boys.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Cole saw Mira pantomime a slight bow. With a bow, Cole said, “I’m Cole Randolph, a friend of Mira’s.”

Jace bowed also. “I’m Jace.”

“How did you meet my daughter?” Harmony asked, not unkindly, but with interest.

“Their parents are visiting actors,” Mira said. “Very talented. You know how I enjoy the performances in town.”

“Very well,” Harmony said, looking at the boys. “Come with us for now. If Mira likes you, I’m certain you’re not dull, though I’m afraid you won’t be able to join her in the coach to Lindenwood.”

“You wouldn’t want to ride with us,” Mira said. “That coach will end up in the river.”

“Enough nonsense,” Ella snapped. “Mother, shouldn’t Mira say farewell to her friends now? Nori is already making us late.”

“Don’t send them off yet,” Mira said. “I’ll behave.”

“Come along, then,” Harmony said, starting across the courtyard. Ella caught up to her mother. Costa and Tessa followed close behind. Mira went slow enough to let them get a few paces ahead.

“This is when Father takes us,” Mira whispered hurriedly. “In the practice yard while we’re fetching Nori. He brings us down to the dungeon and takes our powers while doubles of us go to the coach and get drowned. I could strangle Trillian for making this part of his game.”

“Should I slip away and look for Honor?” Cole asked. “This is the first place, so I make the guess here.”

“We’re on our way to meet up with Honor,” Mira said. “Could she be playing herself in this delusion?”

“Trillian wouldn’t make it that obvious,” Jace said.

“Who knows?” Mira said. “We should check. Honor wouldn’t play along with a re-creation of this day. If it’s really her, she’ll be acting funny.”

Costa dropped back to walk beside Mira. She wasn’t much taller than her younger sister. “What are you three whispering about?”

Mira gave a weak smile. “Cole and Jace leave tomorrow for a new town.”

“You shouldn’t make friends with actors,” Costa said. “They’re always coming and going.”

“How far to the practice yard?” Cole asked.



Mira pointed ahead. "That door leads to a hall. The practice yard is at the other end."

"Do we want to go there?" Jace asked.

"If you want to come with us," Costa said.

"Do we have to keep playing along for them?" Jace complained to Mira, ignoring her sister.

"What do you mean?" Costa wondered.

"I guess we don't have to," Mira said.

"Is it smart to walk into a trap you know is there?" Jace asked.

Mira stopped walking. "It all depends where he would hide Honor. Would he put her along the path I took that day or stick her someplace obscure? The castle is vast."

"What are you talking about?" Costa demanded, raising her voice.

Up ahead, Harmony paused and turned. "Is there a problem?" Ella and Tessa looked back as well.

"I overheard a plot," Mira replied loudly. "Father plans to capture us in the practice yard and strip our shaping powers."

Concern flashed across Harmony's features. "Miracle, what would possess you to tell such a tale?"

"The practice yard is secluded," Mira said. "Nori will be there sparring against Galin. We'll try to convince her to come to the festival. Mother will tell her she doesn't even need to change her clothes and will give her permission to enter the archery tournament. She'll resist. Then a bunch of Father's men will capture us. Galin will die trying to defend us with a practice sword. Owandell will be there."

"I knew today was the end of the beginning," Tessa said, plucking at a ruffle on her apron.

Harmony took a step toward Mira. "Where is this coming from? How can you know Galin will die?"

"Mother." Ella groaned. "You're not actually listening to this nonsense? Guess what you get when you let your daughter play with actors? Tall tales and false drama!"

"Is this some kind of game?" Harmony accused.

“I’m serious,” Mira insisted. “We need to hide. We should scatter. Don’t let him take our shaping!”

“Look,” Tessa said, pointing. “Owandell.”

All eyes followed her finger to the top of the castle wall, where a man in a brown monk’s robe strode purposefully, his cowl down to reveal his bald head and fleshy face. His eyes glared down intently at Mira.

“Who is he?” Cole asked.

“An adviser who worked for my father,” Mira said. “He led the men who captured us. I think he’s the threat.”

Men in black armor emerged from doors up on the wall and down in the courtyard. Without pause, they charged the nearest castle guards and started butchering them.

“Enforcers,” Cole said, recognizing their outfits from the attack in the ravine.

“They’re everywhere,” Jace said.

“Except up ahead,” Mira observed. “They’re herding us toward the practice yard.”

“What’s going on?” Ella asked, real horror behind her words.

Castle guards continued to die. After going down easy at first, they were fighting back, but the Enforcers were clearly more skilled.

“Traitors!” Owandell called from the wall, pointing a sword at Jace and Cole. “They mean to harm the royal family!”

“He’s the traitor,” Mira yelled back, stabbing a finger at Owandell. “He’s killing our guards!”

“Liar!” Owandell replied, face livid. “These intruders are your doing!”

“This way,” Harmony called, running toward the door to the practice yard.

“Do we go?” Cole asked, looking to Mira.

“It’s that or get killed,” Mira said. “I don’t see anyone who might be Honor.”

With guards falling on all sides, they ran across the rest of the courtyard to the door. Cole drew his Jumping Sword. Harmony and Ella ran faster than the rest and shepherded the others through the large doorway when they arrived.

Once they were all through, Ella shoved the door shut and locked it with a pair of thick bolts.

Harmony glanced at Cole's sword. "You're sure of your allegiances?" she asked.

"I'm on your side," Cole promised.

Harmony produced a short, sharp dagger. "This way."

They ran along a wide corridor with an arched ceiling. Hefty torches burned in sconces. Their footfalls echoed off the bare walls. Another door awaited at the far end of the hall. Ella got there first and heaved it open.

A covered walkway surrounded the practice yard, separated from the bare expanse by a balustrade. Two figures battled each other out in the center of the yard, wearing leather armor and wielding wooden swords. The clacking of their simulated combat continued in spite of the intrusion.

"Nori, the castle is under attack!" Harmony cried.

The combatants stopped and turned.

"Very funny, Mom," one of them said, practice sword resting on her shoulder. "I'm not coming to the festival."

"Honor, our defenses are compromised," Harmony called sternly. "Guardsmen are falling by the dozen."

"You're serious," Honor said, taking off her helmet. Her short, sweaty hair was mashed to her head.

"What can I do?" asked her sparring partner.

"Start by finding a real sword, Galin," Harmony suggested.

"Is it her?" Cole asked Mira quietly.

"I don't think so," Mira said. "She's playing it too straight. I can't imagine Honor going along with a charade like this."

"Where should we go?" Ella asked.

"This way," Galin said, running toward the far side of the practice yard.

The door he was heading for opened, and dark-clad soldiers emerged. Other doors to the practice yard burst open as well, admitting more Enforcers, most armed with swords, some with clubs or axes.

Distressed and flustered, Cole tried to harness his desperation by jabbing his Jumping Sword at a balcony and shouting, "Away!" The sword failed to pull

him at all.

Stafford Pemberton emerged from one of the doors. A man of average height with hollow cheeks and a hint of gray in his dark hair, Cole recognized him, thanks to the fabricated version of the High King who had talked to Mira when they'd fought Carnag. Stafford raised both hands peacefully. "Please, everyone, stand down. This is all a terrible misunderstanding."

The Enforcers held their ground. Already more than twenty of them had entered the practice yard.

"What's going on, Stafford?" Harmony asked, the edge in her voice showing she did not believe him innocent.

"I apologize for the grandiose show of force," Stafford said. "We have traitors in our midst." He thrust a finger at Mira. "That is no member of our family. It's an elaborate disguise! We have been betrayed. Owandell! Execute these spies immediately."

The doors by which Cole and the others had entered the practice yard opened, and Owandell emerged, sword in hand. "Gladly," he said. Several Enforcers followed him.

"How could that not be Mira?" Honor challenged, stepping forward. "Why bring all of these soldiers to apprehend three children?"

"Shaping is at work here," Stafford said. "Stand down, Honor."

Weapons ready, the Enforcers pressed closer to them, cutting off all escape. Honor glanced uncertainly at her mother.

"This is a bust," Mira said. "Try Nori."

Face grim, sword ready, Owandell paced toward them. Cole lunged at Nori, grabbed her wrist, and yelled, "Honor!"

## CHAPTER

# 31

## MR. BARRUM

**I**t was night. Stars shone in the sky overhead. Cole, Jace, and Mira crouched in a wide field full of enormous weeds, facing a heavily weathered wooden fence that must have stood fifty feet high. Turning, Cole found that a discarded washing machine, bigger than a dump truck, blocked much of his view. An unseen light source beyond the washing machine brightened the yard. To one side of Cole grew a clump of waist-high dandelions. On the other was a snail shell almost the size of a soccer ball.

“I guess that wasn’t Honor,” Cole said. “One down, two to go.”

“Don’t talk about what we have left,” Jace said. “Let’s win it here. We’ve got this.” He paused, looking around. “Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” Mira said. “But I’ll take anywhere over that last place.”

“Was that how it happened?” Cole asked. “Enforcers came and grabbed you?”

Mira shook her head. “Trillian’s version was extra dramatic. There was no attack with guards dying. It all happened in the practice yard. We were taken by my father’s bodyguards. Like ten or so. Galin died trying to defend us, and Honor had to be disarmed. My father never came to the practice yard. Owandell was there, though.”

“We didn’t have much time to hunt for Honor,” Jace said.

“Once we started straying from my memories, it went bad fast,” Mira said. “Trillian didn’t leave us much choice about where to go. Did you notice how we got driven to the practice yard?”

“Did we even see Honor?” Cole asked.

“I don’t know,” Mira said. “I was trying to pay attention. I guess she might have been some random guard. Or a bird in the background. Or she could have been in some part of the castle we never saw.”

“That wouldn’t be very fair,” Cole said. “Trillian said we’d have a chance to win.”

“He told us it would be hard,” Jace said. “Maybe we bailed out too quickly. Maybe we needed to fight our way someplace else.”

“We were surrounded,” Mira said. “Owandell was coming to execute us. We had to make our guess and move on.”

“What is that thing?” Jace asked, gesturing at the old washing machine.

“It’s a washing machine,” Cole said. “Probably a broken one if it’s out here. But it’s way too big. Everything is oversized.”

“What does it wash?” Mira asked.

“Clothes,” Cole said. He noticed a crushed soda can the size of a wastebasket. He heard crickets chirping. Giving the stars a more serious look, he found the Big Dipper. “We’re in my world.”

“Your world’s a dump,” Jace said.

Cole barely heard the insult. The yard was suddenly familiar. He walked sideways so he could see around the washing machine. Sure enough, there was a one-story house with a large back porch and rabbit hutches off to the side. A porch light was on, and from one window came the bluish flickering of a television. “I know where we are.”

“Where?” Mira asked.

“Mr. Barrum’s house,” Cole said.

“That tells us nothing,” Jace said.

“I used to live in Idaho,” Cole said. “Up until first grade. Mr. Barrum had a big weedy yard at the end of our street. He kept rabbits in the back. Past his house, it was just empty fields. All the kids in the neighborhood were scared of him. When I was in kindergarten, our cat, Smokey, vanished one night.

Some other kids lost their cats too. Dad said it was probably coyotes or an owl, but all the kids knew it was Mr. Barrum. He always carried an ax around, and when kids went near his house, he'd shake the ax at us and tell us to stay away from his rabbits."

"We're in your old town?" Mira asked.

"Yeah," Cole said. "Outside of Boise. But we're small. Trillian shrank us. Or else he made the yard really big."

"This Barrum guy wasn't a giant?" Jace asked.

"No," Cole said.

"Do you think he's the threat?" Mira asked.

"Probably," Cole said. "I hated that guy. I used to have nightmares about him."

"Does he have a family?" Jace asked. "Does he have dogs?"

"He lived alone," Cole said. "Just the bunnies."

"Do we look for Honor here?" Mira asked. "Should we go somewhere else? Your house maybe? Someplace with more people?"

"It'll be hard to get out of the yard," Cole said. "His whole backyard is fenced. I remember climbing up to look over the fence once with my sister and . . . some older friend. They boosted me up. I remember the washing machine. And the rabbit cages. Mr. Barrum saw me peeking. He came stomping out of the house, yelling about private property. We ran for our lives."

"If Barrum is the bad guy, then Honor might be a rabbit," Jace reasoned.

"That would make sense," Cole said. "If Trillian wanted to mess with my head, making Honor one of those rabbits would be brutal. You didn't go near Mr. Barrum's rabbits. You stayed away from his house. You tried not to ever see him."

"How many rabbits?" Mira asked.

"I don't know," Cole said. "A bunch. Maybe ten. I only saw into his yard one time."

"It's my turn to make the guess," Jace told Mira. "Should we go see if any of the rabbits remind you of your sister?"

"We need to be quiet," Cole said. "He's in there watching TV."

“What’s TV?” Mira asked.

“It’s . . . well . . . a box that tells you stories,” Cole said.

“Your world has weird magic,” Jace said.

“Let’s hurry,” Mira said. “Remember, Trillian is running this. He might make Mr. Barrum more vigilant than usual. He might add things Cole doesn’t expect. That just happened to me with my family.”

They jogged across the yard, weaving around tall weeds, a huge work glove, and a few cinder blocks the length of beds. After jumping over a green rubber hose, they took cover behind a rusty barbecue not far from the hutches.

The hutches looked like a row of small shacks on stilts. The fronts were open, leaving the rabbit cages visible, though no rabbits were in sight. Each cage adjoined a small enclosed space where the rabbit could hide away.

“Eight cages,” Cole said. “Must be eight rabbits.”

“Unless some are empty,” Jace said. “He raises them for meat, right?”

“I always thought so,” Cole said. “I figured he probably ate our cat, too.”

“Those cages will be hard to reach,” Mira said.

“It would be cool if those Jumping Swords started working again,” Jace murmured.

“I’ve tried,” Cole said.

Mira ran over to the hutches. Cole and Jace joined her. The bottom of the hutches were more than three times their height.

Mira walked around one of the wooden legs supporting the hutch, appraising it. “Can we climb this?”

“There isn’t anything to grip,” Jace said. “A Jumping Sword would sure be handy.”

Cole drew his sword and aimed it up at one of the cages. Closing his eyes, he envisioned the sword working. He pictured ghostly flames dancing along the length of the blade. He put all of his will into making the sword function.

Opening his eyes, Cole firmly commanded, “Away.”

Nothing happened.

“Nice work,” Jace said dryly.

“We have to get up there,” Mira said, shooting Jace a reproachful look.



“What if we drag over some of those blocks?” Jace asked.

“Those giant cinder blocks are too heavy,” Cole said, scanning the area. On the porch near the back door he spotted a cooler, and beside it a bag of blue plastic cups. “Got it.”

Not waiting to explain, Cole ran to the porch. Jace and Mira came with him. The clear plastic bag wasn't tied shut, so Cole pulled open the mouth and went inside, feeling a little like he was wrestling with a parachute. The cups were stacked inside of one another. Grabbing the top one, Cole yanked it free from the rest and dragged it out of the bag. Standing it up, the cup came to the top of his chest.

“Pyramid,” Jace said, going after a cup of his own.

The cups weren't too heavy. Cole compared it to toting an empty garbage can. Under one of the hutches, they turned two of the cups upside down beside each other, then set the third on top.

“This could work,” Mira said.

“Think we could make it if we go three high?” Jace asked.

Cole shook his head. “We still won't reach. It's going to take four levels. Won't be very stable.”

“We better hurry,” Mira prompted.

They ran back and forth two more times until they had nine cups, then Cole and Jace started arranging them while Mira went for the tenth. The first two rows were easy. After that, Jace had to stand on the bottom row to place the two cups on the third level.

Jace hopped down and rested a hand on the tenth cup. “I'll climb up to the second row,” he said. “Cole, you climb to the first and hand it up to me.”

The cups looked wobbly as Jace climbed, but they held. As Cole boosted himself onto the first row, he leaned into the cup too much. It tipped forward, and they all came down. Jace sprang clear, rolling when he hit the ground.

Ears burning with shame, Cole held his breath. The clatter of falling plastic cups had seemed loud, but hopefully the sound didn't carry inside the house.

Seconds passed. Cole watched the back door.

Nobody came.

“Smooth,” Jace said.

“Sorry,” Cole replied. “You okay?”

“Just terrific,” Jace replied shortly.

“Next time I’ll help brace the cup you climb,” Mira whispered. “I should have thought to do it.”

Moving quickly, they rebuilt the pyramid up to three levels. Jace climbed onto the second row, and while Mira steadied the cup from the far side, Cole climbed onto the first. Mira came around and handed the tenth cup up to Cole, who carefully passed it up to Jace. Cole held still as Jace turned and placed the cup on top.

“Go up,” Mira told Jace. “You’re the key person. You have to make the guess.”

“This isn’t very steady,” Jace muttered, testing one of the cups on the third row. As he climbed onto it, Cole studied his technique. In a quick, controlled movement, Jace boosted himself into a sitting position. Then he slowly stood.

“Nice,” Mira said from below.

“Good thing it isn’t windy,” Jace said, testing the top cup. He hopped up onto it, and it tipped sideways. Cole leaped clear as the cups crashed down. Jace landed on one, crushing it. Fortunately, the cup broke his fall.

It was only a moment before the back door opened and Mr. Barrum emerged, his ax in one hand. Wearing an undershirt and sweatpants, a toothpick poking from his lips, he looked grumpy and absolutely enormous.

Some childhood instinct awoke within Cole at the sight of him. Paralyzed, overwhelmed by a fear much greater than the threat this giant posed, he cringed in terror.

Mr. Barrum started toward the hutches, and his face scrunched up in anger. “Vermin!” he yelled in a harsh voice that Cole remembered all too well. “Get away from those rabbits.”

“We’re leprechauns!” Cole cried desperately.

Mr. Barrum either didn’t hear or didn’t care. He came stomping over to them, his ax gripped in both hands, ready to swing.

Too late Cole realized that a smart person might have hidden inside a cup. He lay still while Jace ran one way, Mira the other. Mr. Barrum veered

toward Mira. Jace had retreated under the hutches. By dashing out into the open, Mira had made herself the more obvious target.

Mira raced for the nearest cinder block. If she could climb inside the hollow part, it might offer temporary protection, but this mission was blown.

Cole jumped to his feet and drew the Jumping Sword. “Over here!” he screamed, waving the blade, hoping to distract Mr. Barrum from Mira.

Mr. Barrum didn’t notice.

Taking big strides, Mr. Barrum caught up to Mira before she reached the cinder block. As the ax came whistling down, something crashed into Cole from behind and Jace yelled, “Honor!”

## CHAPTER

# 32

## SKY CASTLE

**I**t was daytime again. Puffy white clouds softened the blue sky. Cole lay sprawled on thick grass with Jace on top of him. Judging by the scale of the grass, they were back to normal size.

“What happened?” Cole asked.

“Sorry,” Jace said, moving off him. “I had to get us out of there. I wasn’t sure if my guess would count if I didn’t touch a living thing, so I grabbed you.”

“This is ridiculous,” Cole griped. “I thought we were supposed to have a chance! That time we never even reached another living thing!”

“We might have been close,” Jace said. “She could have been a rabbit. We didn’t make it up there to find out.”

“Trillian warned us it would be hard,” Mira said. “We have to win, anyway. It’s now or never. My guess this time.”

She walked over to Cole and gave him a hand up. As Cole brushed himself off, he looked around, trying to refocus. A huge wall loomed ahead of them. Gray blocks the size of cars were fitted together without mortar. A large, gateless archway granted access through the wall. Part of another wall was visible through the arch. Above everything soared a narrow, straight tower, stretching absurdly high, its base out of view.

“Oh, no,” Jace moaned.

“What?” Mira asked.

“This was my worst sky castle,” Jace said. “My fifth mission. I never came closer to dying.”

Cole checked over his shoulder. Behind him, the grass ended at an abrupt edge with only sky beyond. Glancing around, he didn’t see any skycraft or distant castles.

“Tell us about it,” Mira said.

Jace gave a weary sigh. “It was bad. I chose not to wear a parachute. Back then, I thought speed was more important than a safety net. These walls are part of a maze. At the center is a herd of horses.”

“Scary,” Cole said.

“Says the guy with nightmares about bunnies,” Jace snapped. “I haven’t finished.”

“What’s the threat?” Mira asked.

“There was a monster,” Jace said. “A big one. Maybe twice my height. It had blades for hands. The lifeboat set me down in the center with the horses, but the monster chased me into the maze. It played cat and mouse for a while. I swear it toyed with me for fun. Then it drove me up the tower. There were no rooms—just a spiral stairway that went up and up. I seriously thought I would die from exhaustion. The monster was right behind me, its blades scraping against the stone steps. I could hear it breathing. At the top was a musty room with no windows. I was cornered. I knew I was dead. There was no way out, no way back to the lifeboat.”

“How’d you make it?” Cole asked.

“The room had lots of old chests and trunks,” Jace said. “Inside one of them I found the golden rope. As soon as I picked it up, I could feel that it moved however I wanted. When the monster entered the room, I used the rope to dodge around it and zoomed down the stairs. That was the first time the rope saved my life. It was also my closest call as a scout.”

“I never heard that story,” Mira said.

“I’ve never told it,” Jace said, looking up at the tower.

“What other living things were here besides the horses?” Mira asked.

“Just the horses,” Jace said. “While running from the monster, I got a good tour of this place. There are about twenty horses at the center of the maze, near the base of the tower. They roam free in a field.”

“Do you remember how to get to the middle?” Mira asked.

“With the rope, I was able to get on top of the walls,” Jace said. “That made the maze a snap. It seems a lot worse when you’re down inside of it.” He stared up at the top of the wall. “Might be hard to get up there right now.”

“If only we had some plastic cups,” Cole mused.

Jace chuckled. “Sorry about falling back there.”

“I’m just glad I wasn’t the only one,” Cole replied.

“Those walls must be thirty feet high,” Mira said. “I don’t see a way up. We’ll have to chance the maze.”

They walked through the archway and into a long corridor of stone. Mira and Cole looked to Jace.

“This way, I think,” Jace said. “It’s been a long time. My last visit was pretty frantic.”

“Does the monster live in the tower?” Mira asked.

“I don’t think so,” Jace replied. “The room felt more like a storage room than a lair. When it attacked me last time, the creature appeared in the maze.”

“Do you think you could recognize Honor as a horse?” Cole asked Mira.

“I sure hope so,” she replied. “This is our last try. What if the creature corners us? I just use my guess and get us out, right?”

“We don’t let it corner us,” Jace said. “We split up. Cole and I will try to lead it on a chase while you get to the center of the maze. Only waste your guess to save your life.”

They reached an intersection, and Jace turned. The new corridor let the lofty tower peek into view over the high walls of the maze. “I wonder if my rope is up there?” Jace asked.

“Don’t you have it with you?” Mira asked.

“Always,” Jace said, removing the golden strand from his pocket.

“Shouldn’t it work here?” Cole wondered.

Jace whipped the golden string around. “Nope. Not a bad thought, though.”

“I don’t think Trillian would put a working rope up there,” Mira said. “He’s making it hard to win. Cole’s mean neighbor was a giant! We shouldn’t expect any favors. The tower is probably just a death trap in this version.”

They reached a four-way intersection, and Jace stood with his hands on his hips. “I’m just guessing now,” he said, turning left.

They were halfway to the next intersection when the monster stepped into view. The shiny black creature walked upright like a human and bristled with countless slender spikes. Lacking a neck, the broad head didn’t rise much higher than its powerful shoulders. At the end of each long arm protruded a pair of cruel blades, like sickles.

Tugging Cole and Mira, Jace turned and raced back the way they had come. Glancing back, Cole saw the monster loping after them, arms swinging.

“Split up!” Jace yelled as they reached the four-way intersection. Jace kept going straight, Mira went left, and Cole turned right, which was back toward where they had entered.

Heart drumming, Cole ran hard, looking back just in time to see the monster continue straight through the intersection, following Jace. Cole skidded to a stop.

What good would it do for him to head back to the entrance without getting chased? If he reversed his direction and followed Mira, he might catch up in time to help her. If the monster caught up to her, she would need somebody to distract it.

Cole ran after Mira. As he neared the intersection, he wondered if the monster might be waiting for him just out of sight. If so, Cole knew he was about to find out what he looked like on the inside.

The intersection was clear. Cole charged forward, the way Mira had gone. After a couple more intersections, Cole realized it would take incredible luck for him to choose the same turns she had. Plus, she was a little faster than him, so it wasn’t likely he’d catch her.

Cole decided his goal should instead be to reach the center of the maze. If he got there ahead of the others, he would wait, maybe study the horses a

little. He kept his eyes and ears open, aware that around any corner he could run into the monster.

He wondered if Jace was all right. The monster hadn't seemed too fast. Of course, it also hadn't seemed to be going at full speed. Would the monster toy with Jace like last time, or would it go for a quick kill?

Cole hit a dead end and doubled back. Sweat glossed his face and arms, and it was getting hard to breathe. Even chased by a monster, there were limits to how long a person could sprint. Especially when the monster was out of view.

Slowing to a jog, Cole kept using his glimpses of the tower to take turns toward the center of the maze. More dead ends led to more course corrections.

"It's not after me anymore," Jace cried from a distance. "It stopped chasing me! Watch out, guys! It might be coming for you!"

Tingles of fear sparked across the back of Cole's shoulders. He increased his jog to more of a sprint again.

After rounding two more corners, an archway came into view up ahead. Through it he saw green grass and a couple of horses. He ran that way, then he saw Mira down a corridor he passed. She was heading the wrong way.

"Mira!" Cole called, yelling at half volume.

Mira stopped and turned. Cole waved her toward him, and she ran.

When she reached Cole and saw the archway ahead, she smiled and sprinted harder. "Nice job," she panted. "I was hopelessly confused."

As they dashed through the archway, the meadow came fully into view. The tower was now completely visible, reaching for the clouds like a medieval skyscraper. More than twenty horses grazed in the field, most of them on the far side of the clearing. Different colors and patterns were represented in their coats, including white, brown, gray, gold, and black. Several were white and brown. One was light blue.

Mira ran toward the main herd. Nearly all the horses trotted away from her. A gray horse with a dappled rump also avoided her, but stayed apart from the rest. Two of the horses, a gold one and the light blue one, walked over to her.



When they drew close, Mira spoke soothingly and stroked their necks. The light blue one nuzzled her.

“What about the blue one?” Cole asked.

“Honor isn’t supposed to recognize me,” Mira said. “I don’t think she’d be this friendly to a stranger.”

“It’s coming!” Jace cried, his voice nearer.

Cole whirled. Through the archway he could see the monster loping toward him. Beyond it, Jace was also running, following it.

“Mira!” Cole called. “We have company.”

“It could be the gray one,” Mira said. She hurried toward it, but the horse trotted away, cantering briefly to increase its distance. Cole ran to cut off the horse, hoping he could drive it back toward Mira.

When the monster entered the clearing, several of the horses whinnied. The monster charged toward Cole, moving with the same loping strides. Waving his arms to keep its attention, Cole fell back toward the tower.

“There, there,” Mira cooed, approaching the gray horse, holding out her arm, grass on her palm. “Come here, girl. Nothing to be afraid of.”

The monster abruptly changed course toward Mira. The gray horse let Mira approach and nibbled some grass from her hand. Mira petted its nose.

“Mira!” Cole warned. The monster was closing in. It didn’t matter if Mira guessed wrong. If she kept waiting, she would die! “Say it!”

Mira looked up and saw the monster only a few strides from her. Jace rushed into the clearing through the archway and started yelling, “Hey! Ugly! Over here!”

Keeping a hand on the horse, Mira crouched and shielded her face with her forearm. The monster stopped in front of her, one long arm raised high, twin blades poised to scythe down. “Yield,” the creature growled in a raspy, alien voice.

“Say it!” Cole repeated.

Letting go of the horse, Mira dove low at the monster. As her fingers reached its foot, she shouted, “Honor!”

## CHAPTER

# 33

## FOG LAKE

**C**ole stood at the brink of a clear pool, surrounded by diverse crystals streaked with luminous color. In the distance rose the pearl-and-platinum extravagance of Trillian's palace.

Not far away, Mira faced a tall adolescent girl in traveling clothes who Cole recognized from their first trial. It was Honor.

Mira beamed up at her sister. Her hair was shorter again, and her clothes were no longer fancy. Honor looked flabbergasted.

"Mira?" Honor finally managed. "It can't be."

"I came to find you," Mira said, throwing her arms around her sister. Honor was a full head taller than her younger sibling.

Rather than enjoy the hug, Honor looked around angrily. "Trillian! Is this another of your tricks?"

"No, Honor, it's really me," Mira insisted. "I came to find you with some friends. We just won your freedom."

A silver bird landed near them and became Hina. "It is true, Honor. This is indeed your sister, and all of you are now free to go."

Honor gazed down at her sister, hands on her shoulders. "Mira?" she said, her voice a little choked. "Is that really you? It's been so long! You look the same."

“So do you,” Mira said, still beaming. “It’s been forever.”

Honor pulled her sister close in a tight embrace.

“I can’t breathe,” Mira croaked after a long moment.

Laughing, Honor let her go, and Mira stepped back. “You’re still flimsy!”

“You still don’t know your own strength.”

“Wait a minute,” Honor said suspiciously. “I was just in a contest trying to win my freedom.”

“You almost killed me,” Mira said.

Honor covered her mouth. “That was you?”

“What was your contest?” Mira asked.

“There were three scenarios,” Honor said. “First, I had to stop Father from abducting us. Then I had to prevent three rats from attacking some rabbits. At the end, I had to stop three horse thieves.”

Mira hit her forehead with the heel of her hand. “You were always the attacker!”

“I’ve been chasing you this whole time?” Honor asked, appalled.

“Me and two of my friends,” Mira said. “Jace and Cole.”

“Oh, Mira, I’m so sorry.” Honor looked over at Cole, then her eyes found Jace. “I didn’t know.”

“People try to kill me all the time,” Jace said.

“Ditto,” Cole added.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Mira soothed.

Honor sighed. “I’m a fool. I expected trickery, but nothing like this.”

“You looked like Owandell to us,” Mira said. “If I was really sharp, I might have guessed it. He never carried a sword. He wasn’t the type to get his hands dirty.”

“You three must have been the captured traitors,” Honor said. “You looked like Father, Owandell, and Serbus to me. We were both duped. We went up against one another through altered versions of the same scenario. Mira, I had no idea.”

“You had to stop us all three times to get free?” Mira asked.

“I had to kill the three of you,” Honor said. “Trillian told me it would be difficult. But I couldn’t pass up a chance to escape.”

“We were looking for you,” Mira said. “We knew you wouldn’t be in your true form. All we had to do was find you, touch you, and say your name. But we only got three guesses—one in each place. I didn’t think about you being the enemy until right at the end, when you asked me to yield.”

“Were you about to pick that horse instead?” Honor asked incredulously.

“It kept apart from the others,” Mira said. “That seemed kind of like you—doing your own thing. But as I got close, it just didn’t feel right. Something told me to wait until the last second, in case I made a better discovery. Asking me to yield was something you would do, but it didn’t seem like something a monster would do.”

“I shouldn’t have done it,” Honor said. “Not if I played his game the right way. Killing you was my ticket out of here. It just seemed harsh to kill a trespasser. You hadn’t stolen a horse yet. None of you tried to fight me. I felt like a bully. No, worse, a murderer. I knew you were probably just some fabrication, and I knew you might disappear again before my blow connected, but I still couldn’t feel right about striking you down without offering you a chance to surrender.”

Cole had moved over to stand by Jace. They stayed off to the side, close enough to hear everything, but not wanting to intrude. Honor glanced at them. “Thanks for coming for me. Look at you. You’re just kids.”

“What are you?” Jace asked. “A wise old grandmother?”

“I meant no offense,” Honor assured him.

“You looked like a monster to us,” Cole asked. “Could you tell?”

Honor shook her head. “I felt like myself the whole time.”

“How well did you know the maze?” Jace asked.

“Not well,” Honor said. “I only knew I had to protect the horses at the center. You three looked like little goblins.”

“Congratulations on winning your freedom,” Hina said, stepping closer to Mira and Honor. “I am to escort you to the gate. Before you go, Trillian asked me to pass along a parting gift.”

“I don’t want anything from him,” Honor said.

“Nevertheless, it is yours,” Hina replied, opening a carved wooden box. A tiny sphere of light emerged.

“What is that?” Mira asked.

“I thought Trillian’s power couldn’t reach beyond this domain,” Honor said.

“This is Spark,” Hina explained. “Trillian did not craft this figment. Callista did. The Grand Shaper rested here for a time before going into hiding. She left several figments with her former master. This one can lead you to her.”

“Greetings,” Spark chirped in a tiny voice.

“After all this time, Trillian wants to guide me to Callista?” Honor exclaimed. “I came to this part of Elloweer looking for her. But then Trillian captured me. He never said a word about helping me find the Grand Shaper.”

“My master knows your mind,” Hina said. “Lately, he has learned more about the fiend Morgassa. He wants her stopped, and he doesn’t believe you’ll have a chance without help from the Grand Shaper. It’s in his interest as well as yours.”

“If he knows where she is, why not just tell me?” Honor asked.

“She has hidden herself deep within Fog Lake,” Hina said. “Finding her on your own would be quite a feat.”

“Your problems are solved!” Spark cheered. “I’m your new leader!”

“You can guide us to Callista?” Honor asked.

“Easily,” Spark replied. “Fog Lake is less than a day from here. With me as your leader, you can’t go wrong.”

“Showing us how to get there doesn’t make you the leader,” Jace corrected.

“It does if you’re following me,” Spark squeaked.

“Tell Trillian we accept the gift,” Honor said. “Will you show us out?”

Within minutes, they were back on the extremely red road. The splendid coach awaited. There was room for four. Hina rode her horse.

Cole looked at the flashy palace receding behind them. Mira caught Honor up about their fight with Carnag and the danger of the shapecrafters.

“I knew nothing about shapecrafters,” Honor said. “Reggie had suspicions about Morgassa’s power being linked to mine. We hoped Callista might aid us.”

“We saw Reggie at Blackmont Castle,” Mira said.

“He’s alive?” Honor exclaimed. “I saw him cut down by members of Trillian’s Red Guard.”

“He lost his legs,” Mira said. “But he survived.”

The coach halted at the end of the road before the open gate. Only blackness was visible beyond.

One of Trillian’s guards held a saddled horse near the open gates. He handed Honor the reins when she approached. “Hi, General,” she said, patting the horse’s neck. “Have they treated you right?” Without a word to the guard or a glance at Hina, Honor led the steed into the perfect darkness. Spark followed, then Mira and Jace. Cole waved at Hina. She nodded at him.

Cole stepped through in time to see Skye pick up Mira in an embrace and twirl her around. “I shouldn’t have doubted,” Skye was saying. “I didn’t expect to see you again!”

Dalton came up to Cole and gave him a hug, then patted Jace on the back. “Good job, guys!” he said. “You found her! What a relief!”

“We were making rescue plans,” Twitch said. “Not very hopeful ones.”

“We weren’t all faithless,” Minimus asserted. “Given the chance, I might have taught that torivor some manners.”

“It was a close call,” Mira said. “The contest was tough. But we won in the end.”

Skye went down on one knee and bowed her head to Honor. “Your Highness,” she said.

Twitch started to kneel and bow as well, which looked interesting since his legs folded the other way.

“Rise,” Honor said. “No bows or curtses, please. I appreciate the gesture, but we’re far from court.”

Twitch straightened and Skye stood up.

“I mean to counsel with Callista,” Honor said. “This figment, Spark, will show us the way. How many of you intend to join me?”

“I do,” Mira said.

“I’m with Mira,” Jace said.

Dalton sidled close to Cole. “Are we in?” he asked softly.

“We’d be on our own without Mira,” Cole said. “Besides, who knows how a Grand Shaper might be able to help us? Maybe that’s who Trillian meant when he said someone with enough power could get us home.”

“We’re coming,” Dalton announced.

Everyone else agreed.

“Then we’ll ride until nightfall,” Honor said. “Our guide predicts we will arrive in less than a day.”

“We surely can,” Spark chirped. “Just rely on your fearless leader.”

“I thank you all for coming to my rescue,” Honor said, mounting her horse. “I made a grave misstep getting caught by Trillian. You saved me from my folly. I’m indebted.”

“We’re just happy you’re all right,” Mira said.

Cole noticed how naturally Honor assumed command of the group. Her presence made it feel like they had been leaderless until now. She rode at the front near Spark and chose a good spot for them to camp as the light failed.

“I’ll watch over you tonight,” Minimus volunteered.

“Nonsense,” Honor said. “We’ll share that duty. You must sleep sometime.”

“Actually, my lady, I require very little rest,” Minimus said. “Watching through the night is a simple matter for me. I would not endanger you with empty boasts.”

“I’ll keep watch too,” Spark offered. “I don’t sleep either. And I see all directions at once. A good leader keeps an eye on his flock.”

“We’ll be well guarded,” Honor said.

“Our enemies will run screaming,” Jace joked. “Nobody would tangle with a little dot of light.”

“Mighty infernos begin with a spark,” Spark cautioned.

“Can you become an inferno?” Jace asked.

“I can alert the dwarf,” Spark said sheepishly.

“Then he can unleash an inferno indeed!” Minimus said stoutly.

“I’ll cloak us in an illusion as well,” Skye said. “We should rest undisturbed.”

As he bedded down next to Dalton, Cole gazed up at the foreign sky. Two dim moons shared weak light. Stars and galaxies clogged the firmament like luminous dust.

“I saw the Big Dipper,” Cole said.

“Here?” Dalton asked.

Cole explained about the simulation of Mr. Barrum’s house.

“That must have been nice to feel like you were home for a while,” Dalton said. “Except for almost getting chopped up by an ax.”

“It was good and bad,” Cole said. “I saw things from our old life. I saw a normal house. I saw a soda can. I even saw the light from a TV. Funny thing is, I’d almost forgotten about TVs. I’d almost forgotten about a lot of that stuff. Maybe it was because I was tiny, or because I knew it wasn’t real, but it didn’t feel as much like home anymore.”

“It was the house of a guy who freaked you out when you were little,” Dalton said. “You would have felt different if you were at your own house.”

“You’re probably right,” Cole said, not fully convinced, but not wanting to belabor the issue.

“I don’t miss TV either,” Dalton said. “But I miss my family. I miss our neighborhood. Playing soccer. I even miss school.”

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“What if we never get home?” Dalton asked.

“We’ll find a way,” Cole said. “At least we know it’s possible.”

“We won’t give up,” Dalton said. “We’ll try everything we can. But what happens if we find Jenna, and the others, and we can’t find somebody who can get us home to stay? What if we can’t fix this? What if our families won’t ever remember us? What if we’re stuck here?”

Cole stared at the stars. He had a lot of the same fears. He didn’t trust his voice, but he had to say something. “I guess we make the best of it.”

“You’re smart to help Mira,” Dalton said. “She’s pretty great. Even Jace is a good guy once you get used to him. We’re on the right side.”

“True,” Cole said. “I just hope we can survive helping them. We had some close calls the last few days. I hope I didn’t lure you to your death.”



“Don’t say that. I chose to be here. I was alone, Cole. I hated it. This is way better. I feel like myself again. We’re doing the right thing. We have to try.”

“I feel the same way,” Cole said. “It’s just freaky.”

“What? Trying to fight some demon lady who can enslave our minds? Getting chased by evil soldiers? It’s unbelievably scary. But the only other choice is to give up.”

“Not going to happen.”

“I’m not quitting either. So here we are. Good night, Cole.”

“Good night.”

Despite his comfy naps, the exertions of the day had left Cole weary. He shifted onto his side, pillowed his head on his arm, and tried to sleep.



The following afternoon, their first view of Fog Lake came from a low ridge not far from the shore. They all reined in their horses and gathered together to regard their destination.

The shoreline nearest them meandered along, damp hard mud in some places, pebbles in others, little peninsulas jutting out here and there. The far shore could only be glimpsed in the gray distance. Flat and white, the lake itself was a perfect bowl of motionless mist. No vapor rose higher than the shore, leaving the air above clear, but as far as they could see, no gaps marred the smooth surface.

“Weird,” Dalton said, drawing out the word. “How does it all stay in place? Shouldn’t some of the fog float away?”

“All day, every day, for centuries, it has been the same,” Skye said. “I’ve never seen Fog Lake, but most people in Elloweer know of it. Farther north is the much larger Fog Sea. It marks the northern edge of Elloweer for miles and miles. None have ever crossed it.”

“Do people go into Fog Lake?” Cole asked.

“Callista does,” Spark chirped.

“Not for many years,” Skye said. “The lake lies too close to Trillian to attract many visitors. It was never safe, riddled with unseen pits and other

dangers. Superstitions abound about Fog Lake.”

“There are many drop-offs and steep places,” Spark squeaked. “And some mist grifters, but we’ll steer clear of them. Callista never has visitors. She’ll be so surprised!”

“Will she be angry you led us to her?” Honor asked.

“Not when I have permission from Trillian,” Spark said. “Callista trusts his judgment.”

“What does that say about how much we can trust her?” Dalton grumbled.

“We need information,” Honor said. “Callista was odd but always friendly to our family.”

“Callista is the greatest enchanter in the whole wide world,” Spark said. “I’m sure she’ll help you.”

“Lead on, Spark,” Honor said. “We’ll follow single file. Keep in mind we don’t float, and neither do our horses.”

“I’ll get you through,” Spark said. “Dress warmly. People get cold down in the deep places.”

Honor had a cloak, but most of them didn’t, so they wrapped up in their blankets. Spark skirted the shore for some distance before turning across a beach of firm mud and heading down into the fog.

Cole watched as Honor and her horse waded into the mist, disturbing it ever so slightly. Mira went next, followed by Jace, then Skye, and then Twitch. Soon Honor was just a head. When she vanished below the surface of the fog, it became still, as if it had never stirred.

“This looks wrong,” Cole said over his shoulder to Dalton as their horses followed the others. “It can’t be natural.”

“I wouldn’t go in alone for a million bucks,” Dalton replied.

“I’ll be right behind you, boys,” encouraged Minimus from his position at the rear.

As Cole’s horse walked forward, he sank into the mist. Once below the surface, he could barely see his hands, let alone Twitch’s horse in front of him.

“Stay close together,” Honor called, her voice sounding much too distant.

“Are you there, Twitch?” Cole asked.

“Yeah,” Twitch answered, his voice not as far away as Honor’s, but farther than it should have sounded. “Keep up.”

“You back there, Dalton?” Cole called.

“I’m coming,” his friend answered.

Cole started focusing on the sound of Twitch’s horse. Hopefully, as long as he heard those hooves, he wouldn’t wander off an unseen cliff.

The farther they progressed, the grayer the fog became. The still, clammy air was cool and damp. Cole bundled his blanket tighter. Rather than part for him, the mist seemed to cling. Every time he inhaled was like taking a tiny drink. He felt the humidity in his lungs. As they went farther and deeper, the temperature dropped.

The sounds of Twitch’s horse grew fainter. “Twitch?” Cole called.

No answer.

“Twitch!” he shouted. His horse jerked beneath him, evidently startled by the yell.

“Cole?” Twitch answered from a great distance up ahead.

“Cole?” Dalton called from far behind, his voice small and worried.

“I think I’m getting lost!” Cole shouted, patting his horse in an effort not to startle it again. He could think of few fates worse than roaming this wet grayness alone. The lake was enormous! Even if his horse didn’t walk off an edge, they could get lost permanently. There was no way to get oriented. And what were mist grifters?

“Stay where you are!” Twitch called back, his voice still remote.

“Stay where you are, Dalton!” Cole shouted over his shoulder. He heard Dalton relay the message back to Minimus.

Cole reined in his horse and waited. What if nobody came? Could his horse find its way out by instinct? Could it outrun mist grifters without going over a precipice?

A little ball of light drifted into view.

“Spark?” Cole asked.

“You’re closer together than it sounds,” Spark said.

A hand touched Cole’s thigh, startling him.

“Hold this rope,” Honor said, her voice a little muffled even though Cole could feel her touch. “It’ll keep us together.”

Cole grabbed the rope, clinging harder than was probably necessary. The little ball of light moved back toward Dalton. Before long it returned, drifting forward toward Twitch.

After some time, a tug on the rope informed Cole that they were advancing again. He nudged his horse with his heels, and the animal started walking.

On they plodded, through a hundred darkening shades of gray, drawing ever closer to pitch darkness. Sometimes the way angled down sharply. Sometimes they wound back and forth. Even with the blanket wrapped tight, Cole felt drippy and chilled. The air seemed so moist that he began to wonder if it was possible to drown in vapor. He put a hand over his mouth and breathed through his fingers. Had anyone ever humidified themselves to death?

Finally, the darkness became complete. Cole longed for the white mist up top that at least permitted some vision. As the unseen mist grew denser and colder, Cole questioned how thick mist could become before it turned into a liquid. Water condensed on his face and blanket. Still, Cole supposed that a soaked blanket was better than none.

And then the mist abruptly ended. Still holding the rope, Cole found he was less than a horse length behind Twitch. Dalton came out of the mist right behind him.

Up ahead stood a large cottage made of rounded stones packed together with mud. It had windows and a thatched roof. Glowing globes surrounded it at a distance. Light also shone from the windows.

As Honor and Spark led the group toward the front door, it opened, and a woman emerged. She was of medium height, and kind of bony, with wild blue hair and large earrings that might have been made from turtle shells. She looked to be around sixty, though her hands appeared older than her face.

“Spark, you little rascal, who have you brought to my doorstep?” the woman asked.

“Honor Pemberton and her sister Miracle,” Spark replied. “Along with their companions. They were excellent followers.”

“Now, there’s a surprise!” the woman hooted. “My first houseguests in ages, and they’re royalty. My home is in quite a state. I wasn’t expecting company!”

“Are you the Grand Shaper Callista?” Honor asked.

“That old hag keeled over years ago,” the woman said. “I’m a figment she left behind to mind the house.”

“Oh, no,” Honor said. “I’m sorry to hear it!”

“And I’m sorry to tease you,” the woman said. “I’m Callista all right. It gets lonely when there’s nobody to joke with but the figments you invent. People need people, or they start to lose touch, wander down strange paths in their minds. Climb off those horses and come inside. You must be cold and wet.”

“Thank you,” Honor said.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Callista cackled. “You haven’t seen the place!”

## CHAPTER

# 34

## CALLISTA

**C**ole felt much better once he was seated by a wide fireplace sipping soup from a mug. The soup didn't have much substance, but the warm broth tasted vaguely like fish. He and the others sat on crates and casks, while Callista swayed in a rocking chair. Little balls of light like Spark hovered around the room. A big, shaggy dog walked up to Cole. He had always wanted a dog, and leaned forward to stroke it, but his hand passed through its intangible body.

"Don't mind Buttons," Callista told Cole. "He just likes to be part of the conversation."

"I'm your only conversation most of the time," Buttons said in a deep voice.

The little balls of light twittered countless outraged protests.

"Unless you include the twinklers," Buttons added. "Or Gurble."

"Gurble?" Mira asked.

"Gurble is an ancient figment," Callista said. "He belonged to many Grand Shapers before me. He holds a lot of knowledge."

"Gurble is stuffy," Buttons complained. "Knowledgeable, sure, but about as companionable as a stack of scrolls."

“I can’t get over Trillian sending you to me,” Callista said to Honor. “I’m surprised he let you go once he had you.”

“My sister freed me by winning a contest,” Honor said.

“Yes, I understand, but Trillian gave her the opportunity,” Callista said. “That is not often the case.”

“I think he is worried about Morgassa,” Honor said. “She’s a monster who is changing the people of Elloweer into her horde.”

“I’m aware of her, darling,” Callista said. “I’m sure we’ll discuss her eventually. But first an important question: How are you all enjoying my soup?”

“It’s great, thank you,” Mira said.

“Nice and warm,” Dalton added.

“What is it exactly?” Jace wondered. “It must be tough to find food.”

“It can be difficult,” Callista said. “I have an exquisite mushroom garden. Fungi flourish here. I also harvest several species of edible slime.”

“Don’t forget the moths,” Buttons inserted.

Cole fought the urge to gag. What had been in his soup?

“Yes, we have a surprising array of moths,” Callista went on. “And there is a pond not far from here where I collect guppies and other wee beasties. I change them into this and that, depending on my mood. Had I known to expect you, we could have enjoyed a grander meal.”

“What about firewood?” Cole asked, setting aside what remained of his soup.

Callista made a face. “No, dear, firewood tastes terrible.”

Cole laughed. “I mean, where do you find firewood? Do you make it out of mud?”

“This isn’t Sambria,” Callista said. “I can’t transform nonliving matter. I get my wood as offerings from the mist grifters. They also bring me food from time to time—frogs, birds, and fish, mostly.”

“Why do they bring you firewood?” Jace asked.

“In return for me not slaying them, dear,” Callista said.

“Trillian told us he trained you,” Mira said.

“Then he told you true,” Callista said.

“Isn’t he dangerous?” Mira asked.

Callista cackled freely. “I don’t know. Buttons, is he dangerous?”

The dog shivered. “He’s not my favorite. Leave it at that.”

“Trillian is very dangerous,” Callista said. “So am I. He would not be the right teacher for many. That wily old torivor knows more about shaping than anyone in all five kingdoms. He sees it as one great whole rather than individual disciplines. I would not have discovered most of what I know without his guidance.”

“Weren’t you worried he’d keep you there?” Twitch asked.

“No, no, no, my pet,” Callista said. “Had I gone there hoping to leave, he would have never let me go. I went there to learn. I was willing to stay forever if it meant I could learn from the best. He knew my motives. And eventually he released me. I returned to him when I went into hiding. He granted me sanctuary for a time, then suggested I set up a home elsewhere, where I could stay in touch with happenings in Elloweer.”

“This place keeps you in touch?” Jace asked.

“Children,” Callista said, shaking her head. “So candid. It reminds me why I never had any. Who would like dessert?”

Cole tentatively raised his hand. The others sat politely.

Callista pointed at Cole. “That one can stay. If you don’t want my hospitality, the fog can have you.” She sweetened her voice. “Once more, who would care for dessert?”

All hands went up.

After tipping back in her rocker, Callista swung forward briskly, catapulting herself to her feet. “Buttons, entertain our guests.” She left the room.

“Okay, she’s gone,” Buttons said in a conspiratorial tone. “What do you want to know?”

“She made you?” Dalton asked.

“With the help of three apprentices, all dead,” Buttons said. “She didn’t kill them,” he clarified.

“What’s for dessert?” Twitch asked.

“I can’t say for sure,” Buttons said. “She’s improvising. Most of the desserts are slime-based. Don’t worry, she changes the slime.”



Changed or not, Cole did not like the idea of eating slime. Dalton read his disgusted expression and scrunched his face in agreement.

“Will she help us?” Mira asked.

“I expect so,” Buttons said. “She doesn’t like the High King at all, and she trusts Trillian. Just humor her.”

“I heard that,” Callista said, sweeping back into the room with a platter full of low wooden cups. “It doesn’t hurt to humor me, but watch that you don’t condescend. I’m eccentric, not daft. Our dessert tonight is sorbet surprise.”

She brought the platter around to her guests. Cole took a cup. Inside was a soft white lump with tiny bits of some herb sprinkled on it. The lump moved as he watched, bulging and shifting. Some of the herbs disappeared into the mass.

“Eat up,” Callista said, settling back into her rocker. “It’s best fresh. You don’t want it to get away.”

Cole probed the white lump with his spoon. The mass flinched a little. Steeling himself, he scooped up a bite and put it in his mouth. The cool texture was like ice cream. It tasted like minty vanilla with a hint of salt. Not bad. He might have liked it more if he didn’t know the main ingredient was slime. Given how attentively Callista was watching everyone, he figured he should eat it all.

“It’s quite good, thank you,” Mira said politely.

“I like this one,” Callista said, winking at Mira. “If you all finish your desserts, I may have a surprise for you.”

“I cannot partake,” Minimus apologized.

“Neither can Buttons,” Callista said. “You’re forgiven. Now, where were we? Ah, yes, at the bottom of Fog Lake. You were wondering how I keep in touch with the affairs of Elloweer while shrouded in a clammy netherworld. My extended solitude has heightened my perceptions. I have some talent with enchanting, you see, and I can sense the web of power across Elloweer. Pluck a strand, and the whole web shivers. A discerning eye can learn much as the pattern evolves. And should a juicy fly land and become trapped?” She licked her lips. “Ambrosia!”

Buttons cleared his throat. “Metaphorically.”

“I’m trying to find a friend,” Cole said. “A shaper who got sold as a slave.”

“Is this person in Elloweer?”

“One of the other kingdoms,” Cole said.

“Regrettably, my perceptions don’t extend beyond the Ellowine borders.”

“You said you know about Morgassa?” Honor asked.

“I have many methods of gathering information,” Callista said. “It helps that I’m an expert with figments. Tell me what you guess about her.”

Mira explained about how Carnag was a manifestation of her powers, and told of their suspicion that Morgassa might be the embodiment of Honor’s abilities.

“You know what I miss?” Callista sighed. “Sunlight. I can fake it better than most.”

A brilliant ball of light appeared in the middle of the room, too bright to look at. A moment later it was gone.

Callista scrunched her lips sideways. “There is something about the actual sun in the actual sky that I just can’t simulate.” She glanced at Honor. “You’re wrong about Morgassa, dear. She is not connected to your power. I can sense where your power goes, and it’s not to her.”

“Whoa!” Mira exclaimed.

“Wait,” Honor said. “Then what is Morgassa?”

“She came from a real heavyweight,” Callista said. “I don’t know his name, but I felt when he surrendered his ability. It’s an odd circumstance. The power came from outside of Elloweer and was changed into Ellowine energy. A nifty trick. Trillian had told me it was possible, but I didn’t see how. Now I have an example to study.”

“Brady,” Cole said.

“Was he kept at Blackmont Castle until recently?” Callista asked.

“Yes,” Cole said.

“That would be the one,” she said. “He gave his power away, but a shadow of it remains. They can never really take it all, not while you live, at least. But he’ll never be anything like he once was. Talk about power! I wouldn’t have tangled with him.”

It was strange for Cole to hear Callista discuss Brady with such respect. He was just a little guy! Of course, that little guy had created a bizarre wilderness full of killer skeletons and enormous toy dinosaurs. His power had been no joke.

“My power connects somewhere else?” Honor asked.

“Surely you’ve guessed it, my dear,” Callista said. “It couldn’t be more obvious.”

“I don’t know,” Honor said.

“You have one of his minions in your midst,” Callista said. “Your power produced the Rogue Knight, of course.”

Cole paused with a bite of sorbet almost to his lips.

“Her power?” Minimus cried.

“Others channeled it to him,” Callista said. “I’m sure they hoped to control Honor’s power through him. But her power claimed the host body and mind.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “The Rogue Knight is Honor’s power, but also a real person?”

“Same with Morgassa,” Callista said. “The power can’t just take shape here like it did in Sambria. It needs a host. Brady’s power worked a potent changing on someone, as did Honor’s. They became Morgassa and the Rogue Knight.”

“I’m astounded,” Honor said. “I’ve heard of this Rogue Knight, but I never suspected a connection to him.”

“He knows much about you,” Callista replied. “His strength rises from your power.”

“Is the Rogue Knight all right?” Mira asked. “He’s alive?”

“He is well,” Minimus said. “I would feel it if he fell.”

“Likewise,” Callista said.

Mira looked relieved. “We know a little about the people who created Morgassa and the Rogue Knight,” she said, then explained about the shapemaker Quima and how she tried to control Carnag.

“I bet Owandell was a shapemaker too,” Honor said. “That would fit.”

“I knew there were people like these shapecrafters,” Callista said. “I’ve felt them meddling with the shaping power. I never learned what they called themselves. They’ve effectively kept to the shadows.”

“But lately they’ve taken on more than they could handle,” Twitch said.

“In Morgassa and the Rogue Knight both,” Callista agreed.

“I’ll have to defeat the Rogue Knight to get my power back,” Honor said.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Minimus said heatedly. “I’ll be a corpse first.”

“Let’s not be too hasty,” Callista said, turning a sharp eye to Minimus. “I would hate to unravel the changings worked on you, little man.”

Minimus stood up and drew his sword. “You’re welcome to try.”

Hand straying to the hilt of his Jumping Sword, Cole shifted to the edge of his seat. He had seen Minimus in action. If this escalated, it would get ugly, fast.

“Sheath that at once, or the mist grifters will feast on your organs,” Callista threatened. “If anything happened to Honor, the Rogue Knight would not only lose his power, but probably his life.”

“Kindness works better with him,” Mira said. “Minimus, you’re under orders to protect me.”

“I’ll always defend my lord,” Minimus said.

“Your loyalty is commendable,” Callista said graciously. “Was that better?” she whispered to Mira.

Mira gave her a thumbs-up.

Callista stroked the arms of her rocking chair. “We must work together. The Rogue Knight may have Honor’s enchanting power, but the threat we all currently face is Morgassa. Unchecked, she will undo all of us—me, you, the Rogue Knight, even Trillian. She generates figments that turn any they touch into her creatures. Her horde will absorb us all unless she is stopped. How are the rest of you enjoying my dessert?”

“It’s good,” Jace said.

The tension had diminished. Minimus sheathed his blade and sat down. Cole relaxed. Most of the others muttered positively about the sorbet.

“The grinaldi representative has not finished his portion,” Callista observed.

“It was wonderful,” Twitch said. “My stomach just gets a little upset when we talk about the end of all life in Elloweer.”

“Out with it,” Callista demanded. “Too minty? Too sweet?”

Twitch bowed his head. “It was squirming.”

“That just means it was fresh!” Callista exclaimed. “Who wants to eat a dead sorbet?”

“How would we work together?” Mira asked.

Callista clucked her tongue. “I suppose if you each take a bite, we can consider his sorbet eaten and the dessert a success.”

“I mean against Morgassa,” Mira said.

“What would happen if you went to fight her right now?” Callista asked.

“Her figments would take us over,” Mira said.

“They would change you into mindless servants under her control,” Callista said. “Long before you got within sight of her, you would merge with her army. Anyone you harmed along the way would be some poor innocent enslaved to her.”

“Can they be changed back?” Cole asked.

“Only by separating them from her power,” Callista said. “Morgassa must be unmade. Isn’t anyone going to finish the sorbet?”

“I’ve got it,” Jace said, taking Twitch’s cup.

“Don’t hog it all to yourself if others crave a final taste,” Callista said.

Jace let Cole and Dalton each have a bite.

“Morgassa has a lot of power,” Mira said. “If we kill her, won’t we let it all loose?”

“Her power is grounded in her,” Callista said. “It isn’t shared with anyone else. It is stable. If you kill her, the power will perish with her. Mira, when your power roamed free as Carnag, your death could have destabilized it enough to incite a catastrophe. But now that your power is once again grounded in you, your power will pass away quietly at your death. As will mine.”

“But how could we get to her?” Honor asked. “Her figments would turn us.”

“This is why Trillian sent you to me,” Callista said. “Morgassa’s figments merge with people and change them. But if you have already been sufficiently changed, there would be nothing to merge with. I’m not talking about a minor cosmetic alteration. I mean a deep, fundamental change like her figments are trying to provoke.”

Cole met eyes with Dalton. He could tell he and his friend were wondering the same thing: What kind of change was she talking about?

“You can make us immune to her figments?” Honor asked.

“If you let me change you enough, yes,” Callista said. “All except Minimus. He has already been sufficiently changed by the Rogue Knight. No figment could touch him. I would have to destroy his connection to the Rogue Knight before I could enchant him.”

“My enchanted nature is meant to remain secret,” Minimus said.

“Then you shouldn’t have come here,” Callista replied. “The connections are plain to me. The Rogue Knight works excellent enchantments. He wields impressive power. Honor has some real potential.”

Minimus turned to Honor. “The Rogue Knight and I are truly fashioned from your stolen power?” he asked.

“My power was stolen by my father,” Honor said. “That much I know.”

“It was channeled to whoever became the Rogue Knight,” Callista assured him.

“Perhaps I spoke rashly before,” Minimus said. “I will always side with him and defend him, but the Rogue Knight needs to know of this. I’m not sure whether he fully understands where his power originated. I have never known him to turn a blind eye to injustice.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Honor said.

“Honor, you need the Rogue Knight,” Callista said. “He and his followers are the strongest allies we have in the fight against Morgassa. Her figments cannot touch them. With the Rogue Knight at your side, the chance for success increases.”

“I believe he would aid us,” Minimus said. “I’ll ask him myself.”

“What about Brady?” Cole asked. “Why were the Enforcers holding him? Did they think he could still help?”

Callista frowned, rubbing her chin. “He would be of little direct use. The power is no longer anchored to him. Perhaps they hoped to gain insight into the power by studying him. Perhaps they thought Morgassa would be sympathetic toward him since she originated from him. At this stage, I believe Morgassa would only be a danger to him.”

“You mentioned you could change us?” Honor said. “Into what?”

Callista made a point of glancing around the room at the cups. “I see your desserts are all finished. As a reward, I will introduce you to my Hall of Masks.” She rocked up out of her chair. “Follow me.”

## CHAPTER

# 35

## MASKS

**A**s everyone rose from their seats, Cole and Dalton drifted over to a corner.

“I was with Twitch on the dessert,” Dalton whispered.

“It didn’t taste bad,” Cole said.

“No, but it *moved*.”

“I hear you.”

“Do you think it’s still alive in our stomachs?”

“I’d rather not think about it,” Cole said with a disgusted shudder.

“What do you think she’s going to change us into?” Dalton wondered.

“Hopefully something cool.”

“Like a squirmy dessert?”

Cole had to stifle a laugh. “I think she totally wants to help us. But I get why you’re worried. She’s a little . . . different.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t live alone at the bottom of a lake.”

Callista led them down a rounded corridor that felt more like an underground tunnel than a hallway in a home. The corridor opened into a dim, rectangular room with a large collection of primitive wooden masks hung against the walls.

The Grand Shaper waved a hand, and globes of light brightened the room. “How does a space get so dusty when nobody uses it?” she complained,



frowning. “I had no idea the Hall of Masks was so untidy! If I’d had even thirty minutes’ notice you were coming, this would have been a very different experience. You’re my first company in decades.”

“You have a lovely home,” Mira said. “We appreciate all you’re doing for us. These masks are interesting. So diverse!”

“Enchanters have different specialties,” Callista said. “Mine is making masks. Each of these masks can work a changing that will transform you into whatever the mask represents. Take a look and see what masks interest you, but please don’t touch any of them yet.”

They spread out and started studying the walls like patrons in a gallery. The masks were all designed to fit humans. None looked very realistic. Some were just carved wood. Others were embellished by beads, stones, leather, paint, or feathers.

Cole could tell what most of the masks represented, although a few were too plain or vague. Most depicted animals. He saw birds of prey, bulls, bears, canines, felines, boars, alligators, apes, rams, sharks, horses, serpents, elk, and even some exotic animals like a walrus and a rhinoceros. There were also masks that looked like certain types of people, including clowns, knights, and maidens.

“Too many choices,” Dalton said, standing near Cole. “Flying would be cool.”

Cole gazed up at a nearby eagle mask. Or was it a hawk?

“How would you like being covered in feathers?” Cole asked.

“Would they be real feathers?” Dalton questioned. “Or wooden, like the mask?”

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “It would be strange to have a beak.”

“Good-bye, lips,” Dalton agreed.

“Any suggestions?” Jace asked loudly.

“Keep in mind that each mask depicts something you’ll become,” Callista said. “You’ll see differently, hear differently, move differently. Choose something that appeals to you. Don’t forget that you’re heading into battle and that you need to travel. With the mask on, you’ll enjoy a host of benefits. You won’t need rest. You won’t require food. You’ll have increased strength.

And it will be virtually impossible for anyone to change you into something else.”

“Can we try some out?” Mira asked.

“It wouldn’t be wise to sample more than one,” Callista cautioned. “You can lose yourself in these masks. Each new mask you try significantly increases the risk of submerging your identity. Once you select a mask, you should go outside, put it on, and never touch another one.”

“We can forget who we are?” Dalton asked.

Callista nodded. “With the mask, you become yourself as a falcon, or a bear, or a knight. It’s then up to you whether you remain the falcon, or the bear, or the knight. Only you can remove the mask. If you choose to leave it on, you will live out your days in your new form. You would only last a few months. You’d burn bright and strong, and then you would be gone. It has happened before. I only lend these masks in times of great need.”

“What about if we wear one for a few days?” Twitch asked.

“You will cause no permanent damage, so long as you remove it in the end,” Callista said. “I would strongly discourage wearing one for more than a week.”

“I can’t help but feel drawn to the knight,” Honor said, pointing at a certain mask.

“Then it might be for you,” Callista said. She walked over to a support beam and squinted at it. “This wood is rotting. And there are traces of mildew. You see a room differently when you have guests. Suddenly all the imperfections you’ve learned to ignore leap out at you.”

“The room looks fine,” Skye said.

Callista waved her hands dismissively. “You can’t win against the damp. The worst of the mist stays out, but the humidity is unavoidable.”

“How do you keep the mist away?” Cole asked.

“I don’t,” Callista said. “There are empty pockets like this scattered about the deeper portions of Fog Lake. I claimed this one. The mist grifters use them as well.”

“Did you build this house?” Dalton asked.

“I had aid from members of the Red Guard,” Callista said. “Trillian has been generous. A couple of his Red Guard stayed here with me for years. Eventually, they passed away. I never asked for replacements, and he never sent any.”

“I like the bull,” Dalton said. “Seems like that would be tough in battle.”

“You’d definitely have some brute strength,” Cole agreed. “And you’ll be popular at rodeos.”

“Take down the mask you want,” Callista said. “Don’t put it on. Bring it out front and wait for me.”

Everyone began choosing masks. Skye took a bear. Jace picked a wolf. Mira selected a bighorn sheep. Twitch grabbed an eagle. After some deliberation, Cole walked away from an ape mask and claimed a mountain lion.

On his way out of the Hall of Masks, Cole felt a hand on his shoulder. “I need to speak with you for a moment,” Callista said.

She led Cole back into the room as the others departed. In a moment they were alone.

“Did I choose a bad one?” Cole asked, holding up the mask.

“No, the mountain lion is a fine choice for our current purposes,” Callista said. “I would have warned anyone who opted for something inconvenient. I want to discuss the power you wield. I have met many enchanters over the years, but your shaping power is the most uncommon I have sensed. Tell me about it.”

Cole explained about the time he made the Jumping Sword work. He went on to give examples of his subsequent failed attempts.

“I can’t solve this problem for you,” Callista said. “But I can offer some advice. The issue is not simply a matter of mental exertion or force of will. If you wanted that alligator mask over there, would you try to will it to come to you?”

“I’d go grab it,” Cole said.

“That’s right,” she said. “Your will would motivate you to take action, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“But your will alone would not suffice.”

“Right.”

“Your shaping talent is similar,” she said. “You were feeling strong emotions the first time you accidentally used your power. You thought the emotions were the key, but they may have masked what you really need to learn. You were so distracted by your panic that you failed to recognize the source of your power. You harnessed it accidentally, never understanding how you drew energy from yourself and infused it into your sword. Instead of replicating the successful act, you’ve focused too much on imitating the emotion of the moment.”

Cole closed his eyes and focused on himself, searching for a power source. He couldn’t sense anything unusual. “I don’t feel it.”

“You’re like an infant just learning that he can open and close his hand,” Callista said. “The nerves are there, the muscles are present, but you have not yet mastered using them deliberately.”

“How do I find the right muscles?” Cole asked.

“I can’t show you,” Callista said. “And it’s difficult to describe—like explaining sound to the deaf, or sight to the blind. I know where I reach to access my power. I use my mind much as I would to take a step, or make a fist, or speak a word, but the act is not physical. I’m not flexing a certain part of my body. And yet I’m commanding my power in a similar way. Pay attention to finding your power. Learn what it feels like. Discover what you must do to tap into it. Don’t fixate on the emotion. Did you notice Skye as we were selecting masks?”

“Not really,” Cole said. “I was concentrating on which I would choose.”

“She looked at the masks with fear and awe,” Callista said. “She could sense the power they contain. She may not have apprehended all the fine details, but she touched her mask hesitantly and handled it gingerly because she felt it throbbing with energy. Do you feel the power in your mask?”

“I believe you that it works,” Cole said. “But I don’t feel anything unusual.”

“This is a skill you can develop,” Callista said. “Learn to recognize power in others. Become more conscious of your own power. It’s there. I sense it

clearly. Once you learn to draw from it, then you can start directing it with your will, and perhaps increase its potency with your emotion.”

“I remember feeling it,” Cole said. “I knew energy was going from me into the sword. But after the flow stopped, I couldn’t start it again.”

“That’s good!” Callista said. “At least you have some idea what you’re looking for! Find that feeling you remember. That is where you need to focus. In some ways, it’s easier to recognize your power when you’re calm and untroubled than when you’re distressed. Search out your talent in quiet moments. Don’t push too hard. You’ve done it once. You can do it again.”

“Thanks,” Cole said. “I think that will help.”

“I hope so,” Callista said. “You never know. All shaping is slippery. You’re never done learning. But it can be especially elusive at the start. I would be interested to see what you can do with your power once you learn to access it. Your gift is so unusual that I can’t predict the applications beyond what you’ve described to me. You’ll be in uncharted territory. Shall we join the others?”

“One question,” Cole said. “I’m trying to find my friends and get home. We’re from Outside.”

“A Wayminder could get you home, my boy,” Callista said. “But only temporarily. Those you’re closest to won’t remember you. And you’ll get drawn back here before long.”

“Trillian told me there might be a way to change that,” Cole said.

Callista pursed her lips and blew a long sigh. “I suppose, theoretically. Trillian routinely names possibilities that the rest of us can scarcely imagine. It would involve realigning how the five kingdoms are configured. I know of nobody but Trillian with enough power to attempt it.”

“But it’s possible?” Cole asked.

“In theory,” Callista said. “The Grand Shaper of Creon might have some thoughts on the matter. And who knows what these shapemakers can accomplish. But in practice, the chances are not good. Learn to enjoy your life here, just in case.”

“Okay,” Cole said, disappointed but not entirely surprised. He had known it wouldn’t be easy. “I guess we can go out now.”

He followed Callista back through the rounded hall to her sitting room and out to the front of her cottage. The others waited with their masks. A dome of dark fog pressed against all sides of their clear bubble.

“Honor,” Callista said. “Which is your horse?”

Honor pointed out the steed she had ridden.

Staring at the animal, Callista flexed her fingers. The horse swelled, gaining size and muscle. “I’ve changed your mount so that it will bear you as a knight as quickly and tirelessly as the rest of us can run. Minimus?”

“Mine is there,” the Halfknight said, indicating his smallish horse.

Callista did not grow it as large as Honor’s, but the animal promptly became the second largest of all the mounts. Brushing her palms together, the Grand Shaper gave a satisfied nod. She walked over to Minimus.

“Your changing is amazingly stable,” she said. “You don’t require sleep or food, but the changing will prolong your days rather than shorten them. You could live a hundred years in this state. But it all depends on the Rogue Knight. Should he fall, your power would be lost.”

“You speak true,” Minimus said.

“I can seal your altered state,” Callista said. “If so, your changing would endure, even if the Rogue Knight fell, but it would mean never going back to your former life. As your changing now stands, the Rogue Knight could reverse it, release you. If I seal your changing, your armor would become a permanent part of you. No going back.”

“Would I maintain my connection to the Rogue Knight?” Minimus asked.

“No,” Callista said. “That would be the price. You’ll lose the sense you have of his location, and he won’t sense you either. Your connection to him will no longer sustain you as a knight. But that also means you would remain in your present state even if the Rogue Knight perished or lost his power. The choice is yours.”

“I’ll still be free to serve him?” Minimus verified.

“Or to do whatever else you desire,” Callista said.

“Then seal my power to me,” Minimus said. “Perhaps it will free the Rogue Knight to add another follower. I’m his sworn man with or without a

connection. My knighthood means everything to me. I would consider this a great favor.”

Callista placed her hands on his shoulders. She swayed in place for a moment, then stepped back. “It is done.”

“I feel no different,” Minimus said. “But I’ve lost my sense of the Rogue Knight.”

“As promised,” Callista replied.

“Is Morgassa like the Rogue Knight?” Cole asked.

“In what way?” Callista replied.

“If we stop her, would her horde return to normal?” Cole asked.

“The changings are all tied to her power,” Callista said. “Though she now has full ownership of that power, it still came from outside of her. If Morgassa falls, her horde will be released.” Callista whirled. “Buttons! I leave you in charge until my return. See that Gurble keeps out of trouble. And make sure any bold mist grifters understand that I’ll be back.”

“Are you coming with us?” Honor asked.

“Sometimes the safest action is to take the offensive,” Callista said. “I’ll have a better chance against Morgassa with the rest of you by my side. If you fail to bring her down, there will be no place in Elloweer to hide. For me, leaving Elloweer is impractical. Not only am I committed to its welfare, but without my enchanting to protect me, I would be at the mercy of the High King and his Enforcers.”

“This is more help than I hoped for,” Honor said.

“Not unwelcome, I trust?” Callista checked.

“Beyond welcome,” Honor enthused.

“I can guide you to the Rogue Knight,” Callista said. “Minimus can no longer do so.”

“I feel somewhat adrift,” Minimus admitted.

“I can also guide us to Morgassa,” Callista said. “Our changings should help us press our way through her horde. Morgassa herself will be the biggest challenge. She is a being of tremendous enchanting power. Alone I would be overwhelmed. Perhaps together, we’ll find a way.”

“What about our horses?” Mira asked. “The ones you didn’t change?”

“They’ll follow us out of here,” Callista said. “My figments will help them. The horses will do well. This is fertile country.”

“Should we try on the masks?” Jace asked.

“The time has come,” Callista agreed.

“Don’t you have a mask?” Mira asked.

“Darling,” Callista said. “Don’t forget who made them.”

Callista immediately transformed, expanding into a sleek, black African buffalo nearly the size of an elephant. Her broad horns looked thick enough to pulverize a building.

“Go ahead,” Callista said, her voice unchanged despite her bulky new form. “Put them on.”

Dalton stood beside Cole, mask in hand. Glancing at his friend, Cole asked, “You ready?”

“Are we really doing this?” Dalton murmured.

“Unless you want to stay at the bottom of this lake.”

“Do you think I’ll have an appetite for hay?”

“We’re about to find out.”

Cole pressed the mask to his face.

A storm of sensation assailed him. For an instant, he tipped and spun and grew and shrank.

Cole was on all fours, and it felt completely natural. He was suddenly aware of how useless human arms were for purposes of transportation. Sure, his hands could grasp better than these paws, but he had never felt more stable. Humans teetering around on two legs now seemed a little pathetic.

Taking a couple of steps, Cole felt the new strength in his powerful muscles. He yearned to run and leap, to test his new limits. His senses were quickened. Sounds and smells reached him with greater nuance and meaning.

He was big. No regular mountain lion could match his impressive size. Around him, the other animals were large and powerful as well. Each had a different scent.

“This is wild!” Dalton exclaimed. Except it wasn’t Dalton. It was a mighty bull nearly the size of Callista.



“I could get used to this,” Skye said, now a massive bear. Rearing up on her hind legs, she pawed the air.

“Follow me,” Callista called, charging away from her home and into the mist.

Cole sprang forward, muscles rejoicing as he accelerated to a thrilling speed. Zooming through the mist, low and fast, his smelling and hearing could track Callista with little problem in spite of the darkness. He had to agree with Skye.

He could get used to this.

## CHAPTER

# 36

## KNIGHTS

**T**heir haste leaving Fog Lake made the misty depression seem much smaller than it had on the way in. They never slowed. Cole kept waiting for his muscles to get fatigued, for his lungs to become starved of oxygen, but the exhaustion never hit. After the first hour, he began to trust that he could sprint indefinitely.

They made amazing time. Although they'd come from Edgemont on horseback, their mounts had walked or trotted most of the way. A journey that had consumed a few days went by in a matter of hours. For a time, Blackmont Castle became visible, then it fell away behind them. Above them, in his eagle form, Twitch swooped acrobatically through the sky.

"We're nearing the Rogue Knight's camp," Callista said. "Have you considered whether we want to approach him as animals or in our true forms?"

The question roused Cole. He realized he hadn't been thinking about much of anything besides the primal exhilaration of running.

"What do you think, Minimus?" Honor called from astride her mount.

"The Rogue Knight prefers straightforward dealings," Minimus said. "He would respect you for coming in your true shapes. Honor could be the

exception. He is very familiar with changings that provide added strength and armor.”

When Callista slowed to a stop, the rest of the party followed her lead. After the long run, Cole found it strange to no longer be in motion.

“We’re almost to him,” Callista said. “If we’re going to shed our changings, now is the time.”

“Minimus gave us good advice,” Honor said. “Remove your masks, but keep them close by, in case the negotiation goes poorly. I’ll keep my mask on.”

“I’ll lead us into camp,” Minimus said. “It will help show you mean no harm.”

Cole realized that although he had transformed into a completely new form, he remained aware of the mask on his face. He looked down at his paws. They didn’t seem capable of grasping the mask.

Should he try? Part of him wanted to leave it on. He would miss the strength and agility. Wouldn’t this powerful form be more intimidating than some kid? Why did they have to come before the Rogue Knight as weaklings?

Cole noticed that Dalton and Jace had removed their masks. Through the eyes of a lion, they looked extremely vulnerable.

The instinct to hunt two of his friends jolted Cole into reaching for the mask. His paw grabbed it and lifted it without difficulty. A rush of sensation overcame him as he rose and swayed, his body shifting dramatically.

An instant later, Cole stood on his feet, the mask in his hand. Had all that really happened? His time as a mountain lion already felt hazy and distant, as if he had wakened from a dream. It had been quite a rush—the ability to run so fast for so long, not to mention the heightened senses. But had Dalton and Jace looked like prey for a minute? That was definitely weird and wrong.

Cole examined the simple mask in his hand, feeling a slight temptation to put it back on and feel that strength again. He knew he would wear it again when they faced Morgassa, and the thought was thrilling.

Back in her human form, Callista spoke to an enormous eagle perched nearby. “Twitch, remove the mask. Taking it off is good practice, especially if

you feel reluctant. You will get to replace it after we confer with the Rogue Knight.”

Cole noted that the others, besides Honor, had removed their masks and stood watching the exchange. The huge eagle spread its wings. “I’d rather fly,” it said in Twitch’s voice.

“Fly later,” Cole encouraged. “Lose the mask for now.”

“While you speak with the Rogue Knight, I can stay in the sky,” Twitch replied. “Keep an eye on things.”

“Don’t forget who you are, Twitch,” Cole said. “I felt the pull too. Your village needs you.”

The eagle lowered its head and raised a claw to the beak. A moment later, Twitch stood on the ground, mask in hand.

“Sorry,” Twitch said. “I don’t know what came over me. Flying like an eagle just felt so . . . perfect. I didn’t want to give it up. I’m better now.”

“To some extent, we were all tempted to remain in our altered states,” Callista said. “Remember how you felt when it came time to remove the mask. You must fight to remain in control, or your alternate persona will claim you.”

The advice left Cole a little shaken. He had definitely felt the urge to leave the mask on. Just like Twitch, he would have to keep his guard up.

“You’re all doing well,” Honor encouraged. “I’m grateful to have you with me. Keep your masks handy as we confront the Rogue Knight.”

“I don’t get something,” Dalton said. “If enchanting can only change living things, how come Honor’s mask gave her armor?”

“An astute question,” Callista said. “As with the Rogue Knight and Minimus, the armor is connected to her new identity. In her changed state, without removing the mask, Honor could no sooner take off her armor than she could take off her skin. It is part of her.”

“What about our clothes?” Cole asked. “You know, when we turn into animals.”

“I’ve designed the masks to incorporate your clothing into your altered forms,” Callista said. “Your gear too. Hiding your possessions in your new

anatomy makes the changing more complicated, but it's useful to change back dressed and equipped."

"You have my thanks," Mira said earnestly.

"Are we ready?" Honor asked.

Everyone responded with nods and shrugs.

"This way," Minimus said, nudging his powerful horse forward. While Minimus and Honor took the lead on horseback, the rest of them fell into step behind them on foot. The two armored knights held their horses to a slow pace, but Cole still had to step quickly to keep up.

Cole ended up walking beside Dalton. "What did you think?" Cole asked.

"Awesome," Dalton said. "Almost too awesome."

"You wanted to leave the mask on too?"

"I was so strong," Dalton said. "It was intense."

"The running was great," Cole said. "I felt so . . . alive. And alert. I wanted to hunt something." He didn't mention what prey had caught his eye toward the end.

"I wanted to fight," Dalton said. "I wanted something to get in my way so I could ram it. Funny. I remember how I felt, but it's kind of blurry now."

"We get to do it again," Cole said. "I think you'll get that fight you wanted."

After traveling a couple of hundred yards through a grove of trees, they reached a clearing with three large tents and several small ones. The fully armored knights moving around the camp paused to regard the newcomers.

The Rogue Knight emerged from his sizable tent. The last time Cole had seen him, his armor had been scored and dented, but now it was polished and flawless, with both antlers intact on the helm.

"Minimus," the Rogue Knight greeted in his booming voice. "You brought Miracle back to me. Well done. I did not sense your approach."

"The Grand Shaper has divided me from your power," Minimus said. "But I remain your loyal servant."

"I see," the Rogue Knight said, clearly displeased. "Who are your new companions?"

“Allow me to introduce Honor Pemberton,” Minimus said, his little voice especially tinny by comparison. “She is under the influence of a changing.”

“So I see,” the Rogue Knight said. He inclined his head, antlers dipping toward her. “Honor, I am pleased to find you well.”

“I understand we have much in common,” Honor said.

“What has Minimus told you?” the Rogue Knight asked.

“He revealed nothing,” Callista clarified. “I am Callista, Grand Shaper of Elloweer, and your relationship to Honor was plain to me, as are the altered states of your knights.”

“Then you possess keen awareness,” the Rogue Knight said. “No others have made these observations. You place me in an awkward position, madam. My secrets must be kept.”

“Make no threats, sir knight,” Honor said. “Before we snap at each other, we have a common foe to fight.”

“Morgassa came into being much as you did,” Callista said. “But her energy derived from a shaper of even greater power. Only those gathered here have a chance to topple her. Any ordinary mortal who dares approach her will be assimilated into her horde. Your changings will protect you and your knights, as will the changings I have provided for this band of heroes.”

“I see mostly children among you,” the Rogue Knight said.

Cole fingered his cougar mask. It wouldn’t take much for him to appear a lot more intimidating.

“Do not underestimate the young,” Callista said gravely. “The power behind you and your knights was stolen from a child, as was the power behind Morgassa.”

“I cannot refute that,” the Rogue Knight said, hand on Verity’s hilt. “I received Honor’s power, though I had no part in stealing it. The power that once belonged to her is not only mine to wield—it has become who I am.”

“That power still belongs to her,” Callista said. “It wants to return. Should Honor perish, you’ll be as naked of power as you were before the thievery.”

“I’d be powerless if I survived the trauma,” the Rogue Knight clarified. “I’d more likely be torn asunder.”

“I’m not here to claim my power,” Honor said. “That day may come, but not yet. For the sake of Elloweer, we must stop Morgassa.”

“Why not leave the task to those who created her?” the Rogue Knight proposed.

“If they alone would pay the price for their folly, I would happily agree,” Honor said. “Sadly, those who made her lack the ability to stop her, and they are not the only ones who will suffer. Before long, all of Elloweer will fall under Morgassa’s control. She must be stopped. We’ll have a better chance if we work together.”

The Rogue Knight turned to his men. “I knew a day of reckoning might come for my borrowed powers. I expect that if we stop Morgassa, that reckoning will follow.”

“We will heed your orders, as ever, regardless of the consequences,” Phillip said, his battle-ax on his shoulder. “Lead on.”

“You have more knights,” Minimus observed.

“Three more,” the Rogue Knight said. “The knights Desmond, Oster, and Raul escaped Edgemont with us and have permanently joined my company. Now that you have returned, Minimus, my knights number eleven and a half.”

When the Rogue Knight named Desmond, Oster, and Raul, he gestured at them. Cole noticed they all now wore full suits of armor like his other knights. They also looked larger.

“What about Joe, Brady, and Sultan?” Mira asked. “They couldn’t come with us. Do you know what became of them?”

“Brady and I are here,” Joe said, emerging from a tent, arm in a sling. Brady followed him. Cole felt immense relief at the sight of them. It was great to know that Joe and the little guy were okay.

“What about Sultan?” Skye asked.

Joe frowned. “Sultan succumbed to his injuries a few hours after you left us.”

“He’s gone?” Skye asked, anguish in her voice.

Cole’s relief turned sour. There had been a lot of blood from the wound to Sultan’s shoulder, but the quarrel hadn’t been in the heart or anything. Cole

had expected the sturdy illusionist to recover.

“I did all I could,” Joe apologized. “Not long after he passed away, Brady and I would have fallen into enemy hands if not for the Rogue Knight. Enforcers ambushed us, but the Rogue Knight and his men arrived and destroyed them.”

“May I see the boy?” Callista asked.

Joe turned to Brady. “Do you want to go to her?”

Brady squinted up at him. “Is she nice?”

“I’m a friend, Brady,” Callista said. “I’m here to help.”

“She’s pretty nice,” Cole offered.

Brady crossed to Callista as everyone watched. She placed her hands on his shoulders and looked down at him. He looked small and very young.

“You’re far from home,” she said.

“I want to go back,” Brady said. “Can you help me?”

“Not right now,” Callista said. “I would if I could. Do you know how you came here?”

“I was dreaming,” Brady said. “I got stuck. I couldn’t wake up. I couldn’t leave.”

“I see,” Callista said. “You brought yourself here while dreaming. You opened a way. Then you couldn’t get out.”

“Not until the guys came and got me,” Brady said. “But they didn’t take me home.”

“You had enormous power,” Callista told him.

“I imagined things, and they happened,” Brady replied. “Just like a dream, except it felt really real. I tried to make up happy things. But I couldn’t stop thinking of scary stuff, too. The guys who took me made it go away.”

“You gave them your power, and they channeled it to somebody else,” Callista said.

“They gave it to some lady,” Brady said. “I let them. They promised the dreams would stop. The lady changed.”

“How did she change?” Callista asked.

He paused, looking at the ground. “She became like Mrs. Morgan,” he said softly. “Except worse.”



“Who is Mrs. Morgan?” Callista asked.

Brady studied his feet. “She was my teacher. My first-grade teacher. She was so mean. She hated me.”

“Morgassa,” Cole murmured.

“Yeah,” Brady said, looking over at Cole. “The lady called herself that after she changed. She got taller. She was so angry. She said I was a bad boy. She said she would make me pay. The guys took me away. They took her away too. The guys told me I was safe. They were liars.”

Mira approached Brady. “We’re going to stop her,” she said. “We’re going to stop Morgassa.”

Brady looked worried. “Don’t try. She’ll get you.”

“We have to try,” Honor said.

“Is there anything you know about her that could help us?” Callista asked.

“That lady was different from Mrs. Morgan,” Brady said. “Angrier. Stronger. Kind of like when my monsters came to Dreamland. They were always worse than I imagined.”

“Did Mrs. Morgan have any weaknesses?” Mira asked.

Brady looked stumped.

“Did anything ever scare Mrs. Morgan?” Cole followed up. “Did anything bother her?”

Brady paused to think. “She hated when we wouldn’t pay attention,” he said. “She wanted us to listen. She wanted us to obey. And she hated messes. She always made me clean my desk. It was never good enough.”

Callista approached Joe. “Watch over Brady.”

“I’m coming with you,” Joe protested.

Callista shook her head. “We’re all protected by changings. Someone needs to watch over the boy. He trusts you. We’ll return to you after we deal with Morgassa. How is your arm?”

Joe rubbed it. “Could be worse.”

Callista rested a hand on his shoulder. “You don’t need the sling anymore.”

Rotating his shoulder, Joe rubbed his upper arm and flexed it. “Amazing.”

“A minor changing,” Callista said. “It isn’t truly healed yet. But the changing will leave it fully functional until the healing occurs. Take the boy to the farthest tent. We have matters to discuss.”

“I want to stay,” Brady complained. “I’m not a baby.”

“Come on, Brady,” Joe said. “I know a game.”

“What kind of game?”

“It’s a secret,” Joe said. “You’ll see.”

Joe started walking, and Brady hurried to catch up, taking his hand. They strode away together.

“Morgassa came from the lad?” the Rogue Knight asked, his voice quiet for a change.

“Much like how your power came from Honor,” Callista confirmed. “The chief difference is that the boy gave up all claim to his power. It now exists separate from him.”

The Rogue Knight turned to Honor. “If you surrender your claim to your power, my sword and my knights are yours.”

“I will not,” Honor said. “Your power might feel like part of you, but it came from me. My father and those who aided him took it by force. But I will lay aside my claim for now if you will help us.”

The Rogue Knight drew Verity. “I could slay your companions and take you prisoner.”

“You could try,” Jace said, putting on his mask and transforming into a mighty wolf.

Cole put on his mask as well. Changing into a mountain lion felt so empowering that he let out a yowling roar. This was more like it! The Rogue Knight and his men no longer looked quite so intimidating. Cole almost wanted them to attack. The armor might be problematic, but he felt confident that his claws and jaws were equal to the challenge. As he noticed a bear on one side and a ram on the other, Cole realized that the others had also used their masks.

“I fear neither man nor beast,” the Rogue Knight bellowed. “I had my reservations about attacking children. My men and I would welcome a fairer fight.”

Cole crouched, ready to pounce. The Rogue Knight's horse looked delicious. If Cole stayed low, he suspected he could bring it down without the Rogue Knight touching him.

"If you want a fair fight," Honor offered, "leave the others out of it. Duel with me."

Only Callista remained in her true form. She held up her hands. "Cease this foolishness!" she demanded. "Rogue Knight, I doubt you wish to test yourself in combat against a virtuous young lady. She has not wronged you in any way. You have wronged her. If you cause any harm to Princess Honor, your honor would be the price. You did not personally steal her power. Do not make yourself an accomplice after the fact! Your alternative to helping us would be to live out your days on the run, either evading Morgassa or else falling prey to her. You physically cannot leave Elloweer. Side with us against this menace and give Elloweer a chance."

"You ask too much," the Rogue Knight growled, as if the words had been torn from him. He pointed Verity at Honor. "I am her power more than I am anything else, as are my knights. You ask me to give up my identity. Our identities."

Minimus dismounted and walked to the Rogue Knight. "Sigmund, the identity you wish to protect is not yours. It's hers. Yes, it changed you, but you remain beneath it. Keeping her power goes against all you now stand for and all you taught us."

Silence reigned in the camp. Eleven and a half knights watched their leader in stoic, faceless silence.

"Let's see how the battle goes," Honor suggested. "You have done much good with my power. Perhaps there is more you could accomplish before I ask for it back."

"After this battle," the Rogue Knight said, "you might ask, and I might refuse."

"I'm willing to take that chance," Honor said.

"Our best hope against Morgassa is to unite our efforts," Callista said. "I will stand with you, as will Honor, her sister, and their companions. It's perhaps our only chance to end this menace."

“Very well,” the Rogue Knight said, a hint of defeat in his voice. “I have watched Morgassa. She is indeed a catastrophe of the magnitude you describe. We will join the hunt, but I make no promise about afterward.”

“That problem may resolve itself,” Callista said brightly. “There is a high probability that none of us will survive.”

## CHAPTER

# 37

# SHOWDOWN

**F**luid strides propelled Cole forward at a thrilling speed. The physical rapture of running as a cougar helped him suppress his fears about the upcoming battle. Though worries tickled the back of his mind, they failed to rival the exhilaration of sprinting with this pack of knights and animals.

The knights' mounts must have been changed as much as their masters, because despite the hundreds of pounds on their backs, they had no trouble keeping pace with the other tireless beasts. Hooves thundering around him, a bear charging on one side, a bull on the other, Cole felt close to invincible. What could possibly stand against them?

Cole smelled the horde before he saw them. Something about the scent was . . . unnatural. His instincts recoiled. The horde smelled . . . What? Infected? Rancid? Those words came close. They smelled like nothing he wanted to touch or bite. They smelled like something a healthy animal should avoid.

A little village came into view at the base of a hill. People fled small buildings with stone walls and thatched roofs as the vanguard of the horde fell upon them, hurling frightened villagers to the ground and holding them down as figments claimed them.

“Morgassa is beyond the hill,” Callista called. “Her horde has spread out to swarm several hamlets at once. This will be as good a chance as any to strike.”

“Onward,” the Rogue Knight urged, drawing Verity. “Don’t slow to fight. Success depends on keeping our speed.”

Cole ran harder than ever, paws pulling at the ground, muscles bunching and releasing to heave him forward. No people ran from the village anymore. They had all been overtaken.

Cole braced himself as the first members of the horde drew closer. He compared the revulsion to how he might feel if forced to plunge through deep sewage. But this was worse. At least sewage was natural. His senses warned that this horde was a crime against nature.

The Rogue Knight took the lead. His knights fanned out diagonally behind him, forming an arrowhead that protected Honor and the animals.

Figments glided their way to intercept them, their languid movements deceptively speedy. Human in form, the figments lacked detail. Their faces were blank, and each of their average-size bodies could have been male or female.

Ahead of the figments charged dozens of changed people, their clothes soiled and tattered. Old and young, tall and short, fat and thin, they scrambled forward with deranged intensity, blundering into one another, gibbering and growling with mindless fervor. They moved quickly but gracelessly, as if driven by panic.

The knights did not slow as they reached the horde. Their horses trampled the changed individuals coming their way. Some of the most nimble changelings jumped at the knights, as if hoping to tackle them from their saddles, but the knights beat them back with shields and weapons.

As figments closed in, the Rogue Knight swung Verity in broad sweeps. In whatever direction he waved his sword, the figments disintegrated.

Cole found himself running over fallen changelings. He tried not to harm them. They might be foul and deranged, but they were also innocent people under Morgassa’s control. The knights were of a similar mind, focusing on knocking people aside instead of inflicting fatal wounds. Cole noticed them using the flat sides of their swords and axes to bash rather than slash.

The knights didn't slow as they made it past the outliers and reached the solid ranks of changelings. They mowed through the crowd, sending bodies flying and trampling them into the dirt. Cole could not avoid the fallen changelings carpeting the ground. He focused on keeping his speed up as bodies groaned beneath his paws.

The Rogue Knight kept swinging Verity vigorously, and figments continued to evaporate. After some time, the figments seemed to realize they had no chance against a sword that could erase seemings, and they held back.

But the changelings kept coming.

Cole felt bad for the people underfoot. They didn't mean to attack. They had lost control of themselves. But Cole also knew that given a chance, the changelings would tear him apart. No matter how many fell, the rest pressed toward them, undaunted. Wild eyes rolled back, and saliva drooled from twisted lips. At least they didn't seem to feel any pain.

Cole raged onward, reminding himself that if he and the others failed to stop Morgassa, the changelings would be stuck as her servants forever, and the rest of Elloweer would soon join them. If some changelings got hurt along the way, that was part of the price.

After passing the little village, the Rogue Knight galloped up the shoulder of the hill. The horde had mostly gone around the hill rather than over it, so Cole suddenly was running over a grassy slope instead of injured bodies.

"Morgassa senses us," Callista called. "She's coming our way."

Avoiding the summit of the hill, the Rogue Knight led them up and over the side of it. As they came around to the far side, Morgassa glided into view.

She wore conservative clothes that Cole recognized from his world—a white blouse, a long gray skirt, dark stockings, and flat black shoes. Her hair was up in a messy bun. She looked like a schoolteacher on a parent conference day. He'd had teachers who dressed like her. Except that Morgassa was at least eight feet tall. And she hovered a few inches above the ground.

As they ran down the far slope of the hill toward Morgassa, she drifted in their direction. Raising a hand, she called out to them. Eerily, all the changelings and figments in all directions cried the same words in unison.

“Strangers!” Morgassa and her horde called, countless voices shouting as one. “Halt and explain why you destroy my children!”

“These are not your children,” the Rogue Knight accused, hastening his charge. “You have hijacked innocents.”

“Stop and speak or face my full wrath!” Morgassa and her horde demanded.

“Honor?” the Rogue Knight asked, still galloping.

“What is there to say?” Honor asked from the back of her horse.

“You are misbehaving!” Morgassa shrieked, the horde screaming her words. “Explain yourselves or perish!”

“It might benefit us to better understand her,” Callista suggested.

The Rogue Knight raised an arm and slowed to a canter, then a trot, then a walk. He came to a stop twenty yards up the slope from Morgassa. Cole didn’t like slowing down. He could sense her foul power and wanted to hit her at full speed. Coming to a standstill made him antsy. He shifted, so he could see her between two of the horsemen. Despite her impressive height, she appeared relatively defenseless. Her face was stern and still. Cole could easily picture her in a classroom back home.

“What have you to say?” Honor called.

“Does the master make explanations to the servant?” Morgassa and her horde chanted. “We are the agents of order. Why must you bring chaos among us?”

“You are taking control of people,” Honor called. “Free them!”

“The mother and her children are one!” Morgassa and her horde shrieked. “Why must you defy us? Surrender to the peace of my will.”

“Her puppets move to surround us,” the Rogue Knight warned.

“If you want to talk, stop moving your minions,” Honor called. “Free them or face the consequences.”

Fingers hooking like talons, Morgassa grimaced. Then she and her horde shouted, “*You* do not give ultimatums to *me!*”

“Enough!” Honor shouted back, her voice small compared to the fanatical choir. “Prepare to defend yourself.”



“I like you,” the Rogue Knight muttered over his shoulder to Honor as he spurred his horse forward. His knights followed his lead, and Cole charged behind them, flanked by the other animals.

“Unacceptable!” Morgassa and her minions shrieked. Extending both hands, Morgassa sent at least a hundred newly formed blank figments flowing their way.

The Rogue Knight swung Verity and erased them. Morgassa made more, and he unmade them again.

The Rogue Knight closed on Morgassa, riding straight at her. He raised Verity and leaned sideways to issue a killing stroke.

In a blink, Morgassa disappeared inside a full suit of white armor, embellished with gold accents on the breastplate, greaves, arm guards, and helm. She held a sword nearly as tall as a man, and a shield the size of a tabletop. Standing on the ground, she now stood taller than the Rogue Knight on his horse.

Verity clanged against the shield, then Morgassa leaned into the charge, shoving the Rogue Knight’s horse over with her shield. The horse flopped and rolled, tearing up huge chunks of earth. The Rogue Knight went flying, landing in an awkward somersault.

Swerving expertly, the other knights converged on Morgassa. She blocked a chain mace with her sword, twisted to avoid a lance, and cleaved a knight from shoulder to hip with a vicious slash that unhorsed him and left him writhing.

Not all the knights had room to bring their horses to bear on her. Some leaped to the ground. Others wheeled around for another pass.

A couple of lengths behind the other knights, Minimus charged right at Morgassa. He sprang from the back of his horse and met her sword with his when she swung. The impact changed his trajectory, and he sailed past her, tumbling down the hillside.

Suddenly, Cole found nothing between himself and Morgassa. He raced toward her, claws tearing at the grassy earth. Morgassa faced him, sword raised, shield ready, towering in her splendid armor. He knew the sword was

dangerous. He knew her armor would be difficult to penetrate. But he could also sense her fear.

Because her sword was held high, Cole went at her low, lunging at her legs. His claws raked across the surface of her armor, grinding shallow gouges into the smooth metal. He tried to catch her ankle in his teeth, but she danced away, and the sword swished down, opening a wound along his shoulder and down his side.

Morgassa prepared another blow, but Callista, in the form of an African buffalo, plowed into her, horns lowered. The white knight spun and fell to one knee as the buffalo rumbled by. Then Dalton, in the shape of a bull, smashed into her with his wide horns. Stunned, Morgassa fell to her hands and knees.

Mira, in the form of a ram, rose up high and then bashed Morgassa with a mighty blow from her curled horns. Dropping her sword, the white knight jounced away from the impact. Skye, in the form of a bear, and Jace, in the form of a huge wolf, charged in.

Cole heard tooth and claw grate against steel. Then Morgassa heaved the wolf aside and lunged for her sword. Turning, she lopped off one of the bear's paws and stabbed her sword at the animal's chest.

Leaping between bear and knight, Honor knocked the thrust aside and pressed toward Morgassa. As the white knight defended herself from Honor's attack, the bull approached from behind and lost a horn when Morgassa dodged the charge and chopped downward.

Cole's shoulder and side were on fire. He could feel a large flap of skin hanging loose. The white knight was facing away from him. Enraged, he ran for Morgassa, even though his injured foreleg had lost some of its strength. He sprang at her while she fought off Honor, but he got smashed out of the air by her shield.

Cole felt dazed after he landed. Did Morgassa have eyes in the back of her helmet? She had defended herself perfectly even though he should have blindsided her. The bone-jarring blow had worsened his injury. He wanted to find a place to hide away, so he could recover. A shallow cave would serve. Cole wasn't sure if that desire came from his feline instincts or his real feelings.

Was there a difference? He was a mountain lion. The transformation might have come from a mask, but he hadn't damaged a costume. Those were his nerves on fire. That was his blood spilling to the ground.

From all directions, figments and changelings pressed toward them. Minimus and the other knights turned to ward off the horde. The Rogue Knight frantically swung Verity to disperse the onrushing figments. The battleground where Morgassa fought the animals became an island in an ocean of enemies.

Next to Morgassa, Honor looked almost as small as Minimus. Honor fought with grace and precision, blocking all attacks and keeping Morgassa on defense much of the time.

In the form of an eagle, Twitch swooped down at Morgassa, barely dodging her blade when she whipped it at him. He lost some feathers but appeared to have taken no serious damage.

"Surrender," Honor urged as she fought. "Stop sending your people against the knights. You're killing them!"

"Submit," Morgassa and her horde replied. "You slay your own, for you will soon join us, as all must join us."

Cole watched as the wolf and the ram attacked Morgassa together from behind. "Watch out," he called, worried for Jace and Mira.

As he feared, Morgassa whirled right before they arrived. She slashed the wolf across the chest, and it fell with a whine. Deflecting the ram's horns with her shield, she turned the attack toward Honor and danced away.

Morgassa had a few dents and scratches in her white armor, but as Cole watched, the blemishes disappeared, and the knight grew a little taller. "Join me or perish!" Morgassa and her horde cried, their voices frenzied. "No more warnings!"

The chanting hurt Cole's ears. After testing his claws against Morgassa's armor, Cole knew how tough it was. How were they supposed to defeat her if she could repair it at will?

The knights slowly gave ground, collapsing inward. They had all dismounted, and their horses fought at their sides, wildly stamping and kicking. Despite their tireless effort and great skill, the enemy force was too

great. Weapons bashing, stabbing, and chopping, the knights fell back, shrinking the clearing and leaving behind drifts of bodies. Dalton charged around the inner edge of the clear area, using his remaining horn to punish the changelings who slipped past the knights.

The knights no longer fought to wound. They were battling for their lives. Cole noticed that the fallen changelings stopped smelling infected. At least death had freed them from Morgassa's control.

Morgassa closed on Honor, who was now using all her abilities to resist the enormous white knight. The Rogue Knight turned from the attacking horde and raced to Morgassa. Callista and Mira moved to take his place, brutalizing the changelings with horns and hooves.

Cole tried to rise, but pain seared down his leg and across his side, forcing him to fall flat. Not only had his wound torn open wider, but he could feel broken bones grinding inside.

For a moment, the Rogue Knight and Honor attacked Morgassa together. The white knight held off one of them with her shield and the other with her sword. Then she kicked Honor to the ground with one long leg, and turned her full attention to the Rogue Knight. Each swing he deflected looked capable of knocking him off his feet, but it was a sharp blow from her large shield that finally succeeded.

Jace was down. How badly was he hurt? Cole's heart raced. Okay, the wolf was still breathing. Skye shambled to her feet, hiding her damaged paw, and lumbered toward the white knight, looking more like a cub by comparison. Morgassa struck her down with a fierce slash, then turned to finish Honor.

Cole had to do something! Honor was going to die! His other friends and the knights were distracted by the mass of attacking changelings. Growling softly, Cole wrenched himself to his feet and charged, fireworks of pain exploding in his injured side. He lacked the power to jump, but he went for Morgassa's legs.

The sword hissed down, biting into his back, then Cole felt her metal boot crush his side. His vision edged in darkness, Cole stared in horror as Morgassa stepped away from him and raised her sword to finish Honor.

“Stop, fiend!” Callista shouted, her voice amplified. The buffalo was gone. The Grand Shaper now stood in her true form, arms raised.

Extending a hand, Morgassa conjured fifty blank figments and sent them to attack Callista. The Grand Shaper waved her arms in reply, and a pair of grim giants appeared, head and shoulders taller than the white knight, each gripping a long iron bar. Charging the figments, the trolls bashed the group into nothing with confident swipes. At first this surprised Cole, because figments were intangible, but then he decided that the giants must be figments as well.

Cole raised his head a little, and a surge of pain and nausea hit him so hard that he nearly blacked out. His insides felt full of broken glass that jabbed and sliced as he breathed. Not only was he out of the fight—he doubted whether he would live much longer. Helpless, hurting, he continued to watch with desperate interest.

Morgassa waved an arm, and two dozen shimmering spears sizzled through the air to impale the giant figments Callista had conjured. An invisible wave of power accompanied the spears. Cole felt it wash over him, never physically touching him, but present nonetheless.

Skye tore off her mask. No longer a bear, she stood, apparently uninjured. Though as a bear she had lost a paw, she now had both hands and both feet. Skye held out her hands toward Morgassa.

A wooden crate appeared around the white knight’s helmet, resting on her armored shoulders. Morgassa tried to grab it with her free hand, but her metal glove passed right through it. Skye had blindfolded her with an illusion!

The Rogue Knight charged in. His sword clanged against the side of Morgassa’s waist, making her stumble and leaving a dent. His return stroke smote the side of her knee, and Morgassa went down.

Cole sensed a surge of power from Morgassa as blank figments appeared all around her. Two of them ripped the illusionary crate from her helmet. The Rogue Knight dispelled the figments with Verity while the white knight rolled nimbly to her feet.

Another wave of power proceeded from Morgassa, and a crowd of figments materialized near Skye. One of them lunged into her, merging with her even as the Rogue Knight swung Verity to erase the others.

Her expression feral, Skye hunched and scowled, then dashed toward Callista. The Grand Shaper had created two new giant figments to protect her, but Skye ran through them as if they were made of smoke. Mira came to the rescue, shoving Skye to the ground with her curled horns, then sitting on her to pin her down. Though Skye thrashed and growled, she couldn't squirm out from beneath the large ram.

Back on her feet, Honor joined the Rogue Knight in another attack against Morgassa. As the white knight fought them off, Cole could feel power radiating from her as the gashes in her armor smoothed away. She inched a bit taller, and the blade of her sword extended an extra foot.

Morgassa landed a kick that sent the Rogue Knight soaring. He bounced and rolled down the slope, toward the edge of the clearing where his knights labored to hold back the changelings. Spurred on by his proximity, a few changelings lunged through to attack him.

Once again, Honor was entirely on the defensive. After a particularly harsh series of blows, Morgassa struck with her shield. Honor hacked at the bulky metal rectangle, and her blade shattered. Morgassa followed up with her sword. The powerful swipe sent Honor to the ground with a ragged tear across her breastplate.

Cole sensed shaping energy gathering off to one side. Turning his head slightly, he saw Callista transform into a huge knight in a full suit of black armor, armed with sword and shield. She grew to almost Morgassa's size and then charged.

Cole yearned to help. His instincts told him this was the end. The clearing continued to shrink as the knights and their mounts grudgingly retreated. Another knight was down, as were a few of the horses. Armor battered and scarred, the Rogue Knight was tangled up helping the knights hold the horde at bay, aided by the animals who could still function. Mira continued to pin down Skye. Honor remained on the ground.

The Rogue Knight and Honor were outmatched against Morgassa. If the white knight defeated Callista, they were going to lose. Cole tried to rise, and pain howled through him, crippling the attempt. Dizziness and darkness almost overtook him.

As Cole held still, his vision cleared, and he beheld the white knight and the black knight locked in combat. Sparks flew as blades chopped against shields and armor. They lunged and shoved and kicked, armor scraping and clanging.

Callista slashed Morgassa's sword from her grasp, then followed up with an overhand swipe. Morgassa caught the blade in her gauntleted hand, then jerked it from Callista's grasp, reversed it, and stabbed it through Callista's armor and into her belly.

For a moment, they stood together. Morgassa's hand squeezed Callista's shoulder, fingers denting the armor.

Then Callista stumbled back and dropped to her knees an instant before a blow from Morgassa's shield leveled her. Her own sword protruding from her breastplate, Callista lay on her side and did not stir.

Morgassa retrieved her sword and strode toward Honor, who staggered back to her feet, sidestepping unsteadily. With another burst of power, the dents and scrapes Morgassa had received from Callista disappeared.

In that moment, Cole realized he had been sensing their power. He had felt it surging as they gathered and used it. His awareness had felt so natural that he hadn't considered how new the perception was.

Turning his attention to himself, Cole sensed the power radiating through him from his face. All he sensed was the mask. His own power remained invisible.

Cole thought about how Skye had been healed from her injuries when she removed her mask. He wondered if it could be the same for him. His injuries felt too deep to be healed. He was the cougar. Its body was his. But what if that wasn't true? What if his body was somehow separate? What if removing the mask would let him rejoin the fight?

Raising his paw was agony. His shattered insides sawed against his nerves. His vision swam.

If he removed the mask, he would become vulnerable to the blank figments. How long before he became a deranged changeling like Skye? He had no desire to experience that fate. But all his instincts agreed that he was

about to die from his injuries. And Morgassa was about to strike down Honor, who swayed as if the ground were heaving beneath her.

Part of Cole wanted to surrender to his injuries. His fatigue beckoned him to rest. What was he going to do? Get slashed again? It would be so easy to go limp and fade off to sleep. But the cost was too high. His friends needed him. He had to try!

Electric pain sizzled through his body as he dipped his head to his paw. Gripping tightly, he ripped off the mask.

The pain was gone. His mind was clear. He could still sense the power emanating from Morgassa. More important, he could now sense the power inside of himself. How had he missed it before? As he focused his attention on it, his power flared brighter. Cole drew the Jumping Sword and pushed his power into it. Ghostly flames engulfed the blade.

“Take your mask off!” Cole yelled at Jace, whose wolfish form lay still.

Morgassa swung at Honor, who blocked the blow with her sword but fell to the ground and lost hold of her weapon. As Morgassa prepared her finishing strike, Cole pointed his sword at her and shouted, “Away!”

He soared through the air, up toward the white helmet. It drew near before he had time to think, and his sword gonged against it. Kicking off her armored shoulder, Cole called the command again and landed some distance away.

Morgassa wheeled to face him, extending her sword in his direction. “How dare you!” she and her horde snarled together.

Blank figments streamed toward Cole. Before he could try to jump out of the way, they disappeared. The Rogue Knight was charging Morgassa, and he had just swung Verity.

“Cole!” Jace called.

Cole saw that his friend was no longer a wolf. The mask lay at his feet.

“Get your rope out,” Cole called, using his sword to jump over to Jace.

As Cole landed, Jace produced the golden strand. Cole touched it and forced his power into it. Lukewarm flames flickered along the rope.

The Rogue Knight met Morgassa fiercely, but she was faster and fresher. After their blades had connected several times, Morgassa dropped to one knee



and slashed off both of his legs at the shins. The Rogue Knight fell heavily.

Honor had recovered her sword. Hobbled like a punch-drunk prizefighter, she stumbled into a brutal blow from Morgassa and collapsed beside the Rogue Knight.

Jace's golden rope snaked forward, caught Morgassa by the boot, jerked her high into the air, then slammed her down with a sound like a tank falling off a skyscraper. Again Morgassa went into the air, and again she crashed down. By the third impact, her armor looked crushed.

Golden rope flexing, Jace heaved Morgassa upward again, but her armor suddenly disappeared. Once more she looked like a floating schoolteacher, though her face was scraped and bleeding. The rope no longer held her.

"What devilry is this?" Morgassa shrieked along with her horde. "Such shaping has no place here!"

As the golden rope reached for Morgassa, a sword appeared in her hand, and she batted the rope away. With her free hand, Morgassa summoned a large group of blank figments and sent them at Jace.

"Away!" Cole shouted, jumping sideways to avoid the swarm of blank semblances.

Jace retracted his golden rope to coil it and spring. To his horror, Cole saw that Jace wouldn't get away in time.

And then Honor was on her feet, her armor gone, the knight mask discarded. With both hands, she clutched Verity. The sword seemed too large for her, but that didn't stop her from swinging it.

The blank figments evaporated.

Using his rope, Jace jumped, ending up on the far side of Morgassa. Morgassa whirled to confront Honor.

Cole pointed his Jumping Sword at Morgassa's head and shouted, "Away!"

As he rocketed into the air, Morgassa pivoted to face him, her sword ready. Cole knew there was no way to change his direction, so he tried to get ready to block her swing.

Two duplicates of Cole appeared, flying through the air toward Morgassa. Cole noticed that Dalton had set aside his bull mask. The power behind the seemings came from him.

Beyond Morgassa, Cole saw Jace's rope stretch over to Honor, heaving her into the air and whipping her toward the hovering schoolteacher. As Cole rushed near, Morgassa swung. Cole met her blade with his, feeling the shock of impact throughout the bones and joints in his arms. He lost his grip of the hilt and the Jumping Sword spun away through the air.

Hitting Morgassa from behind, Honor jammed Verity through the center of her back. Sword protruding, arms raised, Morgassa dropped from the sky.

Cole fell too. Morgassa had been well above the hillside. With no chance of making another jump, it would be a rough landing.

With the ground rushing toward him, talons gripped his shoulders, significantly slowing his descent. It took Cole a moment to realize that Twitch had swept in to rescue him again.

Cole still hit the ground roughly, but it could have been much worse. As he turned to thank Twitch, Morgassa lurched forward and slapped the eagle away.

Coughing and gurgling, Morgassa's face was locked in a desperate and fearsome grimace. The sword remained in her back. Her blouse was ruined. Her eyes bulged.

Lunging at Cole, Morgassa fell on top of him. Her long fingernails stabbed painfully into his sides as she spattered him with wet coughs. Cole struggled against her, but even without her armor and gigantic size, Morgassa was very strong.

A wrenching disorientation shook Cole to his core. Everything folded and twisted, as if he were being turned inside out, body and mind. He could feel Morgassa's frightened, furious presence inside of him. Power coursed through him, obscene and spiteful.

Cole's eyes were malfunctioning. He beheld swirling shades of darkness ranging from incredibly black to incomprehensibly black, voids within voids. He heard many voices screaming; an army of voices, hundreds of thousands. Not fun amusement-park screams—burning-building screams.

Reaching for his own power, Cole tried to resist Morgassa. But his ability to sense his power was lost in the stormy flood of her wrath.

And then Morgassa was torn from him. The golden rope yanked her into the air and thrust her down one last time. Verity tore loose. Morgassa lay limp.

## CHAPTER

# 38

## HONOR

**P**anting and sweating, Cole sat up, his vision clearing, as if a veil had been torn away. His ears rang with the ghosts of screams. All was silent now, right? He could feel the four burning wounds on each of his sides where her fingernails had entered him.

In all directions, Morgassa's horde fell. The blank figments disappeared, and the changelings dropped as one, puppets with the strings cut, either dead or unconscious.

Honor approached Morgassa with Verity in her grasp, ready to strike. Morgassa looked different. She was now the height of an average woman, dressed in black, her features duller and less sculpted. Her injuries were no different. She was dead.

Cole shakily stood up. He felt detached from the moment. They had won, hadn't they? That was good, wasn't it? Twitch came to his side, no longer an eagle, his mask discarded.

"Are you all right?" Twitch asked.

"I don't know," Cole replied.

"What did she do to you?" Twitch asked, crouching to peer at the little gouges in Cole's side.

“I’m not sure,” Cole said honestly. “It wasn’t fun. Thanks for catching me.”

“Thanks for helping take her down,” Twitch said.

“Okay,” Jace said, coming toward Cole, his golden rope now small again. “You get some points for that one. Good timing on finding your mojo. You okay?”

Cole rolled his shoulders experimentally. The cougar wounds were gone. His sides burned a little where Morgassa had marked him. Otherwise, physically, he wasn’t bad. Inside he felt oddly drained. Numb. He wanted to lie down in the dirt and go to sleep.

“Cole?” Jace asked again.

Cole realized he hadn’t answered. “I think so.”

“You saved the day,” Dalton said, coming up from behind to put an arm around Cole.

“Thanks for the help,” Cole said. “I noticed the illusions you made.”

“I had to do something,” Dalton replied. “I wish I could have helped more.”

“Maybe next time we’ll lend you a Jumping Sword,” Jace said, slapping Dalton on the shoulder.

Cole walked over and picked up his Jumping Sword. Spectral flames no longer flickered along the blade. Searching inside himself, Cole once again couldn’t sense his power. That couldn’t be right! He knew what to look for now. Concentrating, Cole dug deep and reached for his power, but still felt nothing. Was he just tired?

Honor and Mira stood near Callista’s fallen form. “Cole!” Honor called. “Callista wants to speak with you! Hurry!”

Despite his exhaustion, Cole rushed over to them. He heard Twitch, Dalton, and Jace following.

Still enormous, Callista lay on her back, her sword lodged in her torso. Her helmet had been removed, showing that her head was in scale with her enlarged body. Her intent eyes found Cole.

“She did it to you too,” Callista rasped.

“What?” Cole asked, but he knew.

Callista closed her eyes, swallowed, then opened them. “Morgassa worked some sort of changing on me. After she stabbed me. She disconnected me from my power. She didn’t steal it. Somehow she put me out of sync. She did the same to you.”

Cole nodded. “I felt it. Everything went black.”

“I thought so,” Callista said. “You touched her corrupted power—an endless hunger forever devouring itself. It was bad enough to glimpse. Imagine being her. The power had full control. We freed that woman from a terrible fate.”

“Can’t you reconnect to your power?” Mira asked. “Can’t you heal yourself with a changing?”

“Perhaps given more time,” Callista said, gasping. “It wouldn’t be easy. Morgassa did something unnatural to me. Something that surpasses my current knowledge of enchanting. The injuries I received are personal. Unlike the masks. I designed them to take away all that was part of the animal when removed. Including wounds. The dangers of the masks are never removing them, or dying before you do. I chose to cast aside my mask. It was blocking full access to my power. That meant facing Morgassa with less protection—as many of you risked at the end.”

“Search for it,” Mira encouraged her. “Find your power!”

“My power remains with me,” Callista said. “I can perceive it, if not access it. If only . . . No . . . I lack the time. These shapecrafters must be stopped! The woman who became Morgassa was one of them. She merged her art with Brady’s power. Honor, try to revive Skye. Like the other former changelings, she is sleeping, not dead.”

Honor hurried off.

Callista reached out a hand. “Cole.”

He put his hand in her large one. It made him feel tiny.

“I wish I could undo what Morgassa did to you,” Callista said. “You have a unique gift. You must find your way back to your power. Morgassa has made it difficult. But your power remains. And the five kingdoms need you.”

Supported by Honor, Skye shuffled over. She looked pale, her eyelids and lips a pasty gray.

Letting go of Cole, Callista reached out to Skye, who accepted her hand. For a moment, they regarded each other.

“I name you my successor,” Callista said solemnly. “After I pass, you will be Grand Shaper of Elloweer. I cannot seal the decision with my power. My abilities are currently beyond my reach, and my moments grow few. Go to Trillian. You should not fully trust him, but you need him. Learn from him. Elloweer needs you to become what only he can make you. Once he sees that I have named you my heir, he will teach you. Promise me you will go to him.”

Skye hesitated. Then she squared her shoulders and stood taller. “I promise.”

Callista dropped her hand and slumped back, flat. “All I have is yours,” Callista murmured. “Take care of them.” Her eyes closed, and her ragged breathing stopped.

Honor and Skye knelt close to Callista. Honor probed her neck. “She’s gone,” Honor said, bowing her head.

Skye looked weary and confused, like a young child awakened in the night. Sitting down, she stared dully at Callista’s oversize form.

Cole swallowed back a lump in his throat. He hadn’t even known Callista that long, but she had been nice to him, had helped him. She had been on their side and had fought bravely to protect them. Until coming to the Outskirts, the only person he’d ever known who had died had been a great-uncle who he could barely remember. Now there was Sultan, Callista—plus some kids he had known casually as a Sky Raider. Cole knew he would never get used to living in a place where people regularly got killed.

Turning, Cole saw that the remaining knights had gathered around their fallen captain. Minimus was with them, but three of the knights and several of the horses would not rise again. Their armor had seen better days. It looked like they had tumbled together down a rocky mountainside.

Minimus noticed Cole looking and waved a hand. “Honor, all of you, the Rogue Knight wants to speak with you.”

Cole glanced at Honor. She appeared uncertain.

“As he wishes,” Honor replied.

They walked over to where the Rogue Knight lay supine, armor scuffed and dented, legs gone just below the knees. He did not appear to be bleeding.

“You put Verity to good use,” the Rogue Knight said, his voice a bit tired but still hearty.

“It’s an extension of me,” Honor said. “I felt a strong connection. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” the Rogue Knight replied. “Though I would not be alive without you and your friends. You saved me and you saved Elloweer. No one else could have stopped her.”

Cole wondered whether the Rogue Knight realized his legs were missing. He considered pointing it out.

“It was a group effort,” Honor said. “Callista perished.”

“I feared so,” the Rogue Knight replied. “I lost three of my men. They are beyond all aid. I could repair the damage to myself and the others, but I do not intend to do so, except for Minimus.” The Rogue Knight waved a hand, and Minimus was once again in flawless armor.

“Why just him?” Honor asked.

The Rogue Knight sighed. “Where to begin? It was easy to imagine you spoiled, immature, undeserving. It was easy to tell myself that I wielded your power in the name of the greater good. But now I have witnessed your courage and nobility up close. Of course you are as extraordinary as your power—it originated within you. I should have known. The power that I wield rightfully belongs to you. Who can argue otherwise? I had no honor before your power came to me. I worked for the shapecrafters who created Morgassa. I accepted the power they offered. They wanted me to be their weapon. But the presence of your power opened my eyes and changed my nature. I am proud of who I have become. But if I attempt to withhold your power any longer, the man I have become will be lost.”

“Are you certain?” Minimus asked.

The Rogue Knight held up a hand to stay him. “Though it will reduce me to my former state, and strip my knights of their stations, the honor that guides me demands that this young woman have her power back. I do not wish to walk the same path as Morgassa, claiming what does not belong to



me. I may not have personally taken Honor's abilities, but I collaborated with those who did, and if I now refuse to give up what belongs to her, I may as well have been the thief. My deepest apologies, Your Highness."

"You have done much good," Honor said. "Perhaps I should let you and your men keep my power for a season. I'm afraid that together, you wield it more effectively than I could alone."

"At the moment, perhaps," the Rogue Knight said. "But the power is yours. If I return it to you, it can continue to grow. One day, you will wield it with more might than any of us. And unlike us, you can stray beyond the Ellowine borders."

"This is your decision?" Honor checked.

"It is," the Rogue Knight said. "Phillip. Divide me in half just below the waist. This is my last command."

Breastplate warped and scarred, the knight with the big battle-ax lumbered up to the Rogue Knight. Cole and Dalton shared a shocked glance. Was this an execution?

After raising the weapon high, Phillip paused. "Serving you has been our greatest honor."

Cole looked away as the ax came down. He heard the impact. Unable to resist, he looked back and saw the bottom half of the Rogue Knight parted from the top.

Off to one side, Honor gasped. Eyes wide, she turned to Mira. "It's back! I feel my power! It came in a rush. There were only hints before! It's like it never left!"

Mira hugged her sister.

As Cole watched, the Rogue Knight's armor dissipated, as did the full suits of armor of all the other knights besides Minimus. The knights lost stature. Some, like Oster and Desmond, wore other armor and gear underneath. Some were dressed in plain clothes. Several looked too old or frail to be warriors.

Nobody changed more than the Rogue Knight. Where the great knight had lain, a middle-aged dwarf sat up. He stood, slightly bowlegged, his stocky body barely more than three feet tall. He looked up at those around him.

“Sigmund!” Minimus exclaimed.

“Donovan,” the dwarf replied with a nod. “You kept your armor. I sensed something had changed within you.”

“Callista sealed my armor to me,” Minimus said. “She made my changing permanent.”

The dwarf nodded. “My power was borrowed. Same with Morgassa, even though she had sole claim to it. Eventually, it had to end.”

Cole frowned. “Morgassa worked a changing on me. She separated me from my power. But it didn’t go away when she died.”

“Then she must have used her own power to do it,” the dwarf said. “Her native power.”

“Makes sense,” Honor agreed. “Callista said that Morgassa used to be a shapemaker. She must have used shapemaking on Cole and Callista.”

“I worked for them.” The former Rogue Knight sighed. “The shapemakers. I was no one of import. A lowly servant. Which is probably why they assumed they could control me. They did, at first. But within a week I had turned. Even after receiving great power from them, I still don’t understand the art they practice.”

Cole could hardly believe that this little man with the soft voice was the Rogue Knight. “Your name is Sigmund?” Cole asked.

The dwarf cleared his throat. “Correct. And Minimus is my older brother, Donovan. He never served the shapemakers, as I did, to my shame. When I came to him and offered to make him a knight, he agreed, but insisted on keeping his small stature. He has always been more comfortable with his height than me. He embraced it with the nickname he invented.”

“It was good you made your armor large,” Minimus said. “Otherwise, you would have lost your legs.”

“My armor was big,” Sigmund said. “But I never altered my body to fill it. Since my armor moved with me as if part of me, there was no need. The choice to keep my hidden body small saved my feet.”

“You caused a lot of trouble for such a little guy,” Jace said.

“Never underestimate a man based on his stature alone,” Minimus chided.

“I have much to answer for,” Sigmund admitted. “I have made many more enemies than friends.” He went and knelt before Honor. “I will submit to whatever punishment you see fit to inflict.”

“You used my power well,” Honor said. “In the end you returned it voluntarily. You may have made enemies among the shapecrafters and the power brokers of Elloweer, but you have earned friends as well.” Honor looked to his men. “Are any of you ashamed of your leader?”

Phillip, a lean farmer in his forties, went down on one knee. “I would die for him.”

The other former knights knelt as well, heads bowed. Minimus knelt too.

Honor surveyed the wider area, taking in the sea of unconscious changelings. “I move we continue to keep the true identity of the Rogue Knight a mystery.”

“Prudent advice,” Sigmund said. “The Rogue Knight and his company are no longer. Divulging our past will only harm us and our cause. Let our enemies wonder who we were and where we have gone.”

“I remain,” Minimus said firmly.

“Aye,” Sigmund replied. “You do. And you are now free from any obligations to your former captain. Which may mean we ought to separate for a season.”

Minimus folded his arms. “I would hate to draw suspicion in your direction. I will go with Twitch. The lad needs a champion.” Minimus turned to Twitch. “Will you have me?”

“Yeah,” Twitch said, astonished and pleased. “Of course. Renford won’t know what hit him!”

“My usefulness may have decreased, but I will not forsake the rebellion,” Sigmund said. “It was the Rogue Knight’s cause, but it is now mine as well.”

“Mine too,” Desmond said. “And I’m happy to train any men who want help learning to fight without the aid of enchantments.”

All the other former knights shared their willingness to serve.

“We are yours to command,” Sigmund told Honor.

“Then rise,” Honor said. “The people who Morgassa possessed begin to stir. We should leave this place. I suggest we return to your encampment. Joe

and Brady deserve to know what happened. We can make further choices from there.”

Cole looked out at the army of collapsed bodies. Here and there, bewildered people were sitting up, hair matted, faces smudged with grime, male and female, old and young. So far, only fifty or so were awake out of the thousands in view. Most rubbed their temples, as if troubled by headaches. Ripples of motion passed through the mass of bodies as more people stirred.

“They’re waking up,” Dalton said.

“There will be great commotion soon,” Desmond warned. “We should gather our surviving horses and depart.”

“And the masks,” Jace said. “We can’t leave them lying around.”

Honor came over and put an arm around Cole. “Can you travel?”

“I think so,” he said. He still felt woozy. And oddly stretched.

“You look pale,” she said. “We can put you on one of the horses. Skye too.”

“I think I’m all right,” Cole said

Honor kept an arm around his shoulders. “Everyone contributed today. But you saved us. Without your power, the fight would have been lost. Morgassa didn’t see you coming. Everything you did caught her off guard. I underestimated you and your friends when I first met you, which isn’t fair, since I met you when you rescued me. Thank you, Cole.”

“Sure,” Cole said, embarrassed but pleased. “But I don’t know—you were the one who finished Morgassa.”

Honor shook her head. “Morgassa was finished when your Jumping Sword came to life, along with Jace’s rope. He’s amazing with that thing.”

“They’re out of commission again,” Cole lamented. “For now, at least.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Honor assured him. “We should go.”

Cole went to retrieve his cougar mask. As he bent down to pick it up, everything went black.

## CHAPTER

— 39 —

# NEW MISSIONS

**C**ole awoke swaying atop a horse, bound to the saddle. Oster led the steed. Cole faded in and out of consciousness for some time, only really awakening when they got him down off the saddle at midnight and fed him. Even after the drowsy day, he slept through the night without trouble.

The next two days passed in a series of groggy, disjointed moments. Cole was either semiconscious, strapped in a saddle, or else eating or resting. His body felt depleted. His muscles had the stiff soreness that sometimes follows overexertion. Light worsened the ache behind his eyes, so he kept them closed a lot.

By the fourth day, he began to feel more like himself again, though whenever he reached for his power, he found nothing there. After having consciously perceived it, the absence was profound.

Cole finally noticed that Minimus and Twitch were gone. Dalton informed him they had departed from the battlefield in the opposite direction. Cole regretted not getting to tell Twitch good-bye or wish him good luck.

Lashed onto a different horse, Skye showed a similar lack of vitality. Cole supposed it should come as no great surprise—they had both been invaded by the same corrupt power. All the others Morgassa had changed probably felt

the same way, though there was no way to tell, since they had left the former changelings behind days ago.

On foot with some horses, it took six days to cross the distance they had traveled in a matter of hours as animals and mounted knights. By the time they reached the encampment, Skye looked more like her old self, and Cole felt much more alert.

“Did you get her?” Brady cried, running out of a tent to greet them.

“We got her,” Cole told him.

Behind Brady, Joe emerged from the same tent, a sword strapped to his side.

“She’s dead?” Brady asked. “For sure? Did you chop off her head?”

“Morgassa is no more,” Honor assured him.

Brady looked around at the company. “Where’s the Rogue Knight? What happened to the other knights? Why is Oster back to normal? Why doesn’t Minimus have his armor?”

The chattering questions made Cole laugh. He wasn’t alone.

“You won’t see the Rogue Knight again,” Sigmund explained. “He and most of the other knights are gone. I’m not Minimus, by the way. He survived, though.”

“What about the old lady?” Brady asked.

“Callista died bravely,” Honor said.

“Everybody keeps dying,” Brady said.

Cole knew how he felt, but he wasn’t sure how to respond. The deaths were hard enough for him to deal with—how was he supposed to help a much younger kid figure it out?

“Is the Rogue Knight dead too?” Brady asked.

“Not really dead,” Sigmund said. “Just gone.”

Brady paused, brow scrunched. “What do we do now?”

“That’s the question,” Skye said, dismounting.

“We’ll discuss all that soon enough,” Honor said. “First, let’s get settled and see where we stand with supplies.”

For the next little while, the former knights busied themselves about the camp. Some brought out food stores. Others claimed spare weapons and gear.

Cole helped tend the horses. By the time he finished, Desmond and Joe were handing out breakfast.

Cole sat on a log and munched on a sandwich made from a biscuit, a thick slice of cheese, and a plump sausage. Once the food was distributed, Joe came and sat by him.

“The knights didn’t need to eat,” Cole noted. “Why so much food?”

“They had a lot for me and Brady,” Joe replied. “They liked to be prepared. We have enough stores to feed all of us for a couple of weeks.”

“We won’t be here nearly that long,” Mira said, taking a seat next to Cole. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine,” Cole replied honestly.

“Completely fine?” Mira probed.

“My muscles are still a little sore,” he admitted. “It’s probably from riding tied to the horse for so long. I don’t sense my power at all. Otherwise, I’m good.”

“You were really wiped out for a while,” Mira said. “I was worried.”

“I didn’t feel too bad right after the battle,” Cole said. “I must have been running on adrenaline.”

“You were probably in shock,” Joe said.

“After we eat, Honor wants to talk about where we’ll go next,” Mira said. “Are you all right to travel hard?”

“Sure,” Cole said.

Jace came and sat by them. “I wish Morgassa shook me up a little more,” he said. “It would be nice to get to ride a horse.”

“Jace!” Mira scolded.

“What?” Jace complained. “My feet hurt.”

“It’s okay,” Cole said. “He’s just mad his rope is dead again.”

“Don’t remind me.” Jace groaned. “You saw how fast we won once I had my rope.”

“There were a few other factors,” Mira said.

“Not too many,” Cole said. “Jace was awesome.”

“At least somebody gets me,” Jace said, taking a large bite of his biscuit.

Dalton came over. “Honor wants to talk to everyone.”

“I just sat down to eat,” Jace griped.

“You snooze, you lose,” Dalton said, popping his last bite of sausage into his mouth.

“You can eat while we talk,” Mira pointed out.

Everyone gathered at the center of the camp in a loose circle. Honor and Sigmund stood in the middle.

“We have a plan,” Honor said. “It’s time to take our rebellion seriously. We’ve stalled for too long, mustering support, waiting for the right moment. The shapecrafters are unleashing too much mayhem. They, and my father, must fall before they destroy the five kingdoms. I don’t know how many Morgassas we can survive. It’s time for the Unseen to arise. And we must find my other sisters.”

“Where are they?” Brady asked.

“Based on their abilities,” Honor said, “we can assume Constance is in Zeropolis, Destiny is in Necronum, and Elegance is in Creon. As the oldest, Elegance is the most able to care for herself, and since Creon is the farthest kingdom from here, I suggest Mira, Joe, and her friends go to Zeropolis and find Constance. Desmond and Oster have volunteered to accompany me to Necronum in search of Destiny. Whoever succeeds first can move on to Creon.”

“Brady will stay with me and my men,” Sigmund said.

“But I’m almost taller than you!” Brady complained.

“You’re not taller than my men,” Sigmund told him. “Raul will remain with us to offer protection and training. We’ll get the rebellion heated up here, then branch out to other kingdoms. Without our changings, we’re free to cross borders.”

“What about me?” Skye spoke up.

“We deliberately left your path open,” Honor said. “You’re now the Grand Shaper of Elloweer. You’re free to follow Callista’s advice and visit Trillian or to do whatever else you deem prudent.”

“I never aspired to be Grand Shaper,” Skye said with little emotion. Though she seemed to have physically recovered, Skye had acted subdued ever since the fight with Morgassa. “I’m not equal to the office. I’m good



with seemings, but I'm little better than an amateur when it comes to changings. I'll have to visit Trillian if I hope to succeed in my new role."

"You don't *have* to go to him," Mira said.

Skye shrugged. "Only if I believe in the revolution. And I do. The contest with Morgassa revealed my limits. A strong Grand Shaper could lend much support to the Unseen here in Elloweer. Though it makes me feel like a frightened child, I'll go to Trillian and learn what I can."

"Very well," Honor said. "Are there any objections to the plan we have presented?"

"No objection," Cole said. "But Dalton and I will also be looking for our friends. Especially Jenna. Otherwise, we'll help Mira, like always."

"Understood," Honor said. "We'll do our part to help you succeed."

"Can't I go home?" Brady asked.

"Not yet," Honor said. "Maybe not ever. At least not to stay. Once you've been to the Outskirts, Brady, you tend to get drawn back in. We'd send you home if we could, I promise. Your best hope is the Grand Shaper of Creon, who is in hiding at the far side of the five kingdoms. For now, you'll have to accept Sigmund's protection and remain in Elloweer. You will not be forgotten. I'll do all I can to get you home."

"I'm looking for a way home too," Cole said. "I won't forget you if I find a way."

"Okay," Brady sighed.

"Anything else?" Honor asked generally.

Nobody spoke.

"Then I suggest we stay the night here," Honor said. "We can split up and travel in the morning."

As the group dispersed, Cole and Dalton followed Joe. "Tell me about Zeropolis," Cole said.

Joe smiled and shook his head. "None of the kingdoms are like Zeropolis."

"Are you excited to go home?" Dalton inquired.

Joe paused. "Zeropolis is the kingdom I came from, but it isn't my home. I'm from Outside, just like you two. Before all this, I lived in Monterey, California."

“Really?” Cole exclaimed. “Why didn’t you say that before?”

Joe shrugged. “Never came up. I’m not big on talking about myself. But it looks like our fates are tied together. Can’t say I mind. You kids are pretty remarkable.”

“Have you tried to get home?” Dalton asked.

“Sure did,” Joe said. “With a vengeance. I made it back. Didn’t stick, though. It’s like they say—people forget you, and you get sucked back here. Brutal combo.”

“Do you think we can find a way to get home and stay there?” Cole asked.

“Believe me, I’m just as interested in that as you are,” Joe said. “I’ve never spoken with the Grand Shaper of Creon. It would be worth a shot.”

“But first we go to Zeropolis,” Dalton said.

“That’s the plan,” Joe acknowledged.

“How is Zeropolis different from the other kingdoms?” Cole asked.

“In Zeropolis, shaping is used largely as fuel,” Joe said. “It also gets used to produce building materials. In some ways, they’ve surpassed the technology we had on Earth. Zeropolis makes the rest of the Outskirts look primitive. You’ll see.”

“You don’t sound excited to go back there,” Dalton observed.

“It’s the least friendly kingdom toward the rebellion,” Joe said. “The Grand Shaper of Zeropolis sided with the High Shaper. He’s his right-hand man. Plus, I have . . . personal issues. I volunteered for a mission that took me away from Zeropolis for a reason.”

“Why?” Cole asked.

For a moment, Joe looked very weary. “It’s a long story. I’ll fill you in sometime. On the bright side, Zeropolis has many conveniences you won’t find elsewhere in the Outskirts, and I know my way around there. We’ll talk more later.”

Cole and Dalton spent the next few hours scouring the camp in search of gear they might need. In the end, they had more than they could carry. After stashing it in a tent, Cole and Dalton sat down on a cot.

“You okay?” Dalton asked. “You still don’t seem quite right.”

“I’m trying,” Cole said. “You’ve felt your power. You’ve used it. Imagine if suddenly it was just completely gone.”

“I’d hate that,” Dalton admitted.

“Plus, that whole fight was horrible,” Cole said. “I really felt like I was dying.”

“We were almost goners,” Dalton agreed.

“I’m worried it’s just going to get worse,” Cole said.

Dalton smiled. “Then we’ll just have to get better.”

Cole felt his mood lighten. “You’re right. It’s all we can do. I wonder where Jenna is right now.”

“Hopefully, she’s a slave in some really boring place with a really boring job,” Dalton said.

“I hope so too,” Cole said. “But based on everything I’ve seen so far, it’s probably not true.”

“We’ll find out sooner or later,” Dalton said.

Cole nodded. “We’ll find her. Or we’ll die trying.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every story I write begins as a series of scenes in my mind that I develop through daydreaming. Once I feel like I have a worthwhile story to share, I write a first draft, fleshing out the characters, their relationships, the trouble they confront, the decisions they make, and the consequences they face. After I get that polished up, I share the manuscript with editors who point out weaknesses to cure and strengths to highlight. The process of revision goes on until my editors and I agree that we have come as close as we can to the best version of that particular story. It's never perfect, but the process has always yielded something I'm proud to share.

I need to thank those who helped me whip this book into shape. As always, my wife and kids deserve a big thank-you for allowing me the time it took to write and edit this. As usual, my wife, Mary, was my first reader as I completed the chapters, and her feedback helped me make some important early adjustments.

My editor, Liesa Abrams Mignogna, once again provided many useful insights, and helped me add personality to many of the scenes. I'm grateful that people didn't get to read this book until after she worked with me to strengthen it. Solid feedback also came from my illustrious agent, Simon Lipskar, along with some thoughts from Elv Moody speaking for my British publisher.

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I also want to thank you, the reader. Without you, this book would serve no purpose. Thank you for taking the time to bring this story to life inside your head!

## NOTE TO READERS

Two down, three to go. For those paying close attention, at the end of the last book, I said, “one down, five to go.” Since this is a five-book series, that may seem like a mistake, but it was actually a test, so if you noticed, congrats—you passed. Okay, fine, I’ll admit it. I meant “one down, four to go” and did poor proofreading. Let this be a lesson to you! Always proofread a lot!

There are five kingdoms, and there will be five books in this series. This was the second, and I’m now hard at work on the third.

Writing a series means spending a lot of time with the main characters. By bringing them to life in daydreams, I get to know them pretty well, including information about their pasts and their futures. As the writer, sometimes it’s difficult knowing secrets about important characters or momentous events that won’t be revealed until later books. It can be hard to keep my mouth shut about some of the cool surprises I have in store, but keeping those details to myself is an important part of my job. Trust me—it’s for your own good! I’ve saved some of the most interesting kingdoms and secrets for later in the series.

Beginning a new series is a little like starting my career all over again. I always hope that readers will enjoy the new story. So far it seems that people are liking *Five Kingdoms*. If that is true for you, please spread the word! I’m very excited about my plans for the final books. They will contain some of my best work.

Before *Five Kingdoms* is complete, I will begin work on the sequel series to my *Fablehaven* books. It will be called *Dragonwatch*. I’m excited to share more stories about the characters of *Fablehaven* including Kendra, Seth, Newel, Doren, Warren, Bracken, Vanessa, Raxtus, etc. If you’re liking *Five*

Kingdoms but haven't tried Fablehaven, you should get to know those people!

If you'd like to connect with me or learn more about my work as an author, there are some places where you can find me online. You can like my author page on [Facebook \(Brandon Mull\)](#) and follow me there. You can also follow me on Twitter ([@brandonmull](#)). I routinely post at those outlets, so they are the best places for news. Also, for general information or big news, you can visit [brandonmull.com](#), and you can get maps and some extra info about Five Kingdoms at [EntertheFiveKingdoms.com](#). If you want to send an email, [autumnalsolace@gmail.com](#) is an address I use, but I'm busy enough that I can only answer emails at random from time to time. (I appreciate the messages and read as many as I can.) If you want to meet me in person, I go out on tour when new books release. You can get info about tour visits at the online outlets I mentioned.

That's it for now. Thanks for coming with me this far. Book 3 and Zeropolis are up next!

# About the Author



Laura Hanifin

Brandon Mull is the author of the *New York Times*, *USA TODAY*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling *Beyonders* and *Fablehaven* series. He resides in Utah, in a happy little valley near the mouth of a canyon with his wife and four children. Brandon's greatest regret is that he has but one life to give for Gondor.

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with the resistance movement to search for Mira's sister Honor, but

enemies abound and Cole and Mira must use a new kind of magic to  
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# FIVE KINGDOMS



CRYSTAL KEEPERS

Brandon Mull

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF THE FABLEHAVEN AND BEYONDERS SERIES

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BOOK 3

**Brandon Mull**

ALADDIN

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

FOR LIESA, MY GUIDING STAR



## CHAPTER

# 1

## BUTLER

The sky was getting bright, but the sun had yet to rise as Cole carried his saddle pad to his horse. He tossed it over Ranger's back, but the quilted pad fell through the horse to the ground.

Cole whirled. "Dalton?"

His friend stood a short distance away, arms folded, leaning against a tree trunk. "Not bad?"

Cole picked up the saddle pad and shook off the dirt. "Really good, actually." He swiped a hand through the horse, feeling only a vague, cobwebby sensation. "That looks perfect."

"I moved Ranger last night after you conked out," Dalton confessed. The illusionary horse disappeared.

"Couldn't sleep again?" Cole asked.

"I tried," Dalton said. "I couldn't shut down my brain. It took some time."

"Dalton!" another voice called. Taller than Cole and Dalton by a few inches, though not much older, Jace stormed over to them, his deeply tanned face flushed. "Where's my saddle?"

Dalton cracked a smile. "Isn't it over there?" he asked, pointing.

Cole followed his finger to where Jace's saddle leaned against a mossy log.

"Ha-ha," Jace said. "I already tried to grab it."

The saddle vanished.

"That's two really good seemings at once," Cole said. "How long did you maintain them?"

“Since right before you two got up,” Dalton said. “Fifteen minutes or something.”

Jace huffed. “Good for you. Maybe you and Skye can set up your own dazzle show. Now where’s my saddle?”

Dalton looked around innocently, then craned his head back. Cole tracked his gaze up into a tree where a saddle straddled a high branch, and a laugh spurted out before he could hold it back.

“That better not be real,” Jace threatened. “I’ll drop it on your head.”

The saddle disappeared.

“Three seemings at the same time?” Cole asked.

“It’s over by that stump,” Dalton said, nodding toward the one he meant.

As Cole watched, the scarred old stump melted away to reveal Jace’s saddle. “Four,” Cole said. “And they all looked great.”

Dalton shrugged.

“Nice waste of time, Dalton,” Jace complained. “We’re on the run.”

“You’d do the same thing if you could work seemings,” Cole said.

“I’d make you two walk off a cliff,” Jace said.

“You’d kill us?” Dalton exclaimed.

“Into a lake,” Jace said. “I’d get two of the highest screams ever.”

“We’d cannonball in and make two of the biggest splashes ever,” Cole said. “Then we’d come for you.”

“I’d be pretty scared,” Jace said with a snort. “You guys better hurry up and get ready. We’re moving out.”

Cole turned to reach for his saddle, but Dalton restrained him. “Wait for it.”

Jace hoisted his saddle pad and saddle together, marched over to his horse, and flung them onto its back. The saddle fell through the illusion to the dirt. Jace turned and glared.

“Pick up the pace!” Dalton called. “The horses are this way. We’re heading out!”

Dalton grabbed Cole’s saddle pad and Cole claimed his saddle. They walked together toward where Dalton had moved the horses. Cole glanced at his friend. They had come to the Outskirts together from Mesa, Arizona. When they arrived, they knew nothing about this world. They’d never heard of shaping or the High King or even knew that a place like the Outskirts was possible. A slave trader had kidnapped dozens of kids visiting a neighborhood

haunted house on Halloween and brought them to a bizarre new world. Shortly after their arrival they were marked as slaves and scattered across the five kingdoms. They started out alone—strangers in a strange land.

But they were gradually figuring things out. Cole had managed to find his best friend, and Dalton had some crazy strong abilities.

“That was amazing,” Cole said. “But why go after Jace so hard? He’s a hothead. You’re going to get punched in the face if you don’t watch out.”

“He hid my saddle yesterday,” Dalton replied. “If he wants to make jokes, he has to take them too.”

“I didn’t hide your saddle,” Cole said.

“I didn’t want to make him the only target,” Dalton said. “I know you can take a joke.”

“Right. Because we’re friends and we get each other. Jace could be a different story. I’m not sure you want to tangle with him.”

“Whatever,” Dalton said. “We can’t let him think he’s Mr. Big Shot. So if Jace teases—we tease him back.”

“I get standing up to him,” Cole said. “But is it smart to prank him?”

“What’s the worst he could do?” Dalton asked. “I mean really. Retaliate somehow? If he does, I’ll get him again. It’ll save us trouble down the road.”

“What about when we leave Elloweer?” Cole said. “You won’t be able to make illusions in Zeropolis.”

Dalton sighed regretfully. “That’ll stink. But all the more reason to get him while I can. If he respects me, he’ll back off.”

“Or he’ll tease you harder until you cave,” Cole said.

Dalton shrugged. “I won’t give up.”

“It’s risky,” Cole said.

“It’s more risky to let him bug me whenever he wants,” Dalton replied. “Wait and see.”

They reached Cole’s horse.

“You first,” Cole said.

Dalton laid the saddle pad across the animal’s back. “This one’s real.”

Cole swung the saddle onto the pad. “You better mount up too.”

“If Jace is my biggest problem before we leave Elloweer, I’ll be grateful,” Dalton said, walking away.

Cole gave a nod. “I can agree with that one.”



Shortly after sunrise the Red Road came into view, interrupting the wilderness like a wound. Bordered by maroon curbs, the avenue of seamless red pavement began abruptly and extended to the edge of sight, the only evidence of inhabitants in the otherwise untamed landscape. Cole, Dalton, Mira, Jace, Skye, and Joe had avoided serious trouble since parting from Honor and the former Rogue Knight on their way to Zeropolis. Cole hoped that drawing near to Trillian wouldn't end their peaceful streak.

He looked to Skye, who considered the road warily. He understood her hesitation. The Lost Palace, longtime prison of Trillian the torivor, awaited at the end. As the new Grand Shaper of Elloweer, Skye was about to ask Trillian to become her teacher.

Cole did not envy her. One of the most feared and dangerous beings in the Outskirts, Trillian had been caught off guard by a team of mighty shapers and locked away long ago. Had they failed to imprison him, the torivor probably would have brought the entire Outskirts under his control.

Only a few weeks had passed since Cole first visited the Lost Palace and witnessed Trillian's enormous power firsthand. Inside his prison, the torivor could rearrange reality almost without limits. Not only had Trillian invaded his mind, but Cole had risked his life and freedom to rescue Mira's sister Honor from captivity.

As a rule, the people of Elloweer stayed far from Trillian's domain. Nobody wanted to risk crossing the torivor or the members of his Red Guard, which was exactly why Joe had suggested their little group of fugitives should accompany Skye to the Lost Palace on their way to Zeropolis. Since Skye had official business with Trillian, Joe had been willing to gamble that the nearness of the torivor posed a lesser threat than traveling through more populated regions.

Cole's eyes strayed to Mira, astride her dappled mare. There was no question that her father, the High Shaper, desperately wanted her back. After stealing the shaping powers of his five daughters, Stafford Pemberton had faked their deaths and tried to hold them prisoner. With help from their mother, the daughters had escaped and survived in exile, never aging after their powers were taken.

Not only Mira had regained her power—her sister Honor had as well. The High Shaper had first sent legionnaires to apprehend Mira, and then sent his secret police, the Enforcers. He now had to be more frantic than ever to find

her. Since defeating Morgassa, Cole hadn't seen any agents of the High King, which suggested that the strategy of heading toward the Lost Palace was working.

"Do we ride on the road?" Skye asked, having stopped only a few paces from where the red pavement started.

"We don't really need to hide that we're coming," Mira reasoned. "Hopefully Trillian will be satisfied to learn he'll have a new Grand Shaper to train."

"I don't know," Cole said. "Trillian was pretty interested in you and Honor. He can sense people on his road. Is it smart to let him know you're near?"

"Good point," Jace said, sitting tall on his horse, his face serious. "Last time, Trillian let you go because he wanted us to stop Morgassa. He might try to retake you and keep you this time."

"He'll have more Morgassas to fight if we don't stop my father and his shapecrafters," Mira said. "Trillian can read our thoughts. He'll know how important it is we find Constance and my other sisters."

"Will that matter as much to him?" Dalton asked. "Morgassa was a direct threat. He thought she might be able to take him out. Will he care about problems in other kingdoms?"

"I can tell you one thing," Skye said. "I won't work with Trillian if he tries to hold you."

"He might not care," Cole said. "He can probably find ways to train you whether or not you're willing, Skye. I've met him. The guy can get inside your mind and take over your dreams. Inside his prison, he can do pretty much whatever he wants. He might be more than happy to capture us no matter how we feel about it."

"We can't afford to make ourselves easy targets," Joe said, the only other adult in the group besides Skye. "Taking the road might be a little smoother, but Cole's right—we don't need to let Trillian know we're around sooner than necessary."

"We traveled beside the road last time," Mira said. "It wasn't too bad."

The conversation ended there. Joe and Skye started to parallel the road, and the others followed.

Dalton brought his horse alongside Cole. "Seems like we were just here."

"It really does."

“Minimus was with us last time,” Dalton said. “I wish we had a knight or something.”

“I’m glad he’s with Twitch,” Cole said. “The bully who took over Twitch’s village won’t know what hit him. But if we’re wishing, I’d want Twitch here too. He’s saved my life more times than anyone.”

Dalton nodded. “If trouble comes, Skye and I can hide us with seemings.”

“Hiding is probably our best bet for now,” Cole said.

“At least until you find your power again.”

Cole forced a smile, but he didn’t love the reminder. Not long ago Cole discovered he had the ability to energize magical items from Sambria so they could work in Elloweer. But right before Morgassa died, she had sunk her fingernails into his sides and somehow used shapecraft to separate him from his power. Just after he had learned to recognize and access the ability, it had vanished.

“We have the masks,” Cole said.

“Only as a last resort,” Dalton said. “Callista warned that the more we use them, the harder they’ll be to take off. Plus, she’s no longer around to help if something goes wrong.”

The masks that Callista had given them for their battle against Morgassa could transform them into powerful animals. Looking back at his time as a mountain lion, Cole recalled the experience through a dreamlike haze, running across many miles of Elloweer in a tireless sprint. Dalton was right about the danger—neither time he removed the mask had been easy.

“Last time we were animals, most of us got badly injured,” Cole said. “Jace and I almost died. We might be just as hurt if we put the masks back on.”

“Only one way to find out,” Dalton said. “Not that I’m in a hurry to test it.”

“Once we make it to the Lost Palace, we’ll leave the masks with Skye,” Cole said. “They won’t work in Zeropolis, and they’re too powerful to leave randomly stashed someplace.”

“After that our only defense will be my seemings and Joe,” Dalton said.

Cole looked ahead at Joe. How old was he? Thirty? He hadn’t seemed like an amazing warrior or anything, but he was certainly brave and scrappy. Joe had come to the Outskirts from Monterey, California, but Cole didn’t know much else about his history.

“Think Trillian will give us trouble?” Cole asked.

“We’d be dumb if we didn’t expect it,” Dalton said.

They spent the day with the road on their left, veering closer or farther as obstacles arose. As night fell, they made camp. Bedullah, a large orange moon, eased up into the sky, outshining the nearby stars.

Cole noticed Mira standing apart from the camp, her eyes on the heavens. He walked over to her. “This is the biggest moon, right?”

She glanced his way. “Bedullah is the biggest I’ve seen. It doesn’t show up very often. It makes all the stars fainter. An even bigger golden one used to appear sometimes.”

“Are you looking for your sisters’ stars?” Cole inquired quietly, referring to the heavenly markers that Mira’s mother sometimes used to show her daughters’ locations.

“Every night,” Mira whispered back. “Just in case.”

“Can’t be easy with the stars and moons always changing,” Cole said.

“It isn’t. Their stars are always the same color and brightness, but they can be in any direction, and they show up against a different backdrop every night.”

“I don’t get how the Outskirts have such different skies every night.”

“What’s not to get?” Mira asked, her eyes skyward.

“On Earth the stars have regular patterns,” Cole said. “One moon circles us. Here the stars can be anywhere. You have over ten moons that show up when they feel like it. Where do they hide the rest of the time? What kind of universe shifts around during the day into something else?”

“The heavens here have always been erratic,” Mira said. “It’s just how it is. It’d take somebody smarter than me to explain why.”

“Any luck with the stars?” Cole asked.

“No,” Mira said.

Cole studied the sky. He had no idea what to look for. Mira kept the specifics of the stars a secret. If anybody ever learned about the celestial lights occasionally used by Harmony Pemberton, it could prove fatal.

“Not seeing the stars is a good thing,” Mira said. “It means my sisters are safe.”

“It also means Constance will be hard to find,” Cole replied.

“Then we’ll look hard,” Mira said. “Hopefully we’ll find more of your friends, too.”

Though Cole had found Dalton, he had only crossed the path of one other

person who was kidnapped from Mesa with him—a girl named Jill. He had offered to rescue her, but she had been too scared to try to escape her position as a slave at a confidence lounge, where she helped create illusionary disguises so people could exchange secrets anonymously.

There were still so many people to find! He worried most about Jenna, his friend who had also been his secret crush for years. When they were separated, he had promised to find her but hadn't uncovered any clues yet. Would he finally track her down in Zeropolis?

“Who goes there?” Jace shouted.

Turning, Cole saw a form racing toward their camp. Though it was hard to catch all the details in the mellow orange moonlight, the shape of a man glided hurriedly forward, his feet a few inches off the ground.

Drawing his Jumping Sword, Cole raced back toward the center of camp, where the ghostly figure was heading. One foot got caught against a stone, and he went down badly, twisting away from his blade to avoid slashing himself.

By the time Cole was back on his feet, the figure had come to a stop before Skye. Dressed in a dark suit, the balding man stood with stiff posture. Cole trotted toward them with Mira a step behind.

“Jepson?” Skye exclaimed.

“The very same,” the butler replied, smoothing a hand down the front of his jacket. “Your mother sent me to you.”

Cole halted not far from Skye. Though Jepson appeared tangible and solid, Cole knew he had no substance—he was a figment, a living illusion created by an enchanter. The stuffy man served Skye's wealthy mother. Joe, Jace, and Dalton joined Cole and Mira.

“How'd he find you?” Cole asked Skye.

“He's bound to mother and the person who will inherit him,” Skye said. “He could find either of us anywhere.”

Jepson gave Cole a superior glance then faced Skye. “Do you wish to converse in front of these . . . people?”

“Absolutely,” Skye said. “Is mother all right?”

The butler's brow crinkled, and his lips quivered. He used a long sniff to collect himself. “Sadly, she is not.” His eyes squinted shut, and he shook with sobs. It took a moment before he straightened up and continued. “You must



help her. Lady Madeline has been abducted by a vile ruffian called the Hunter.”

Skye gasped, putting both hands over her mouth. “No!”

Cole had never met the Hunter but knew about him—an Enforcer who had been chasing them since Sambria. In his pursuit of Mira, the Hunter had captured the slavers Ansel and Secha back in Carthage to wring information from them. The Hunter had a scary reputation. Evidently the trail had led him to Skye’s home.

“Your mother ordered me to find you,” Jepson said.

Skye dropped her hands. “Before or after the Hunter seized her?”

“After,” Jepson said. “The Hunter would gladly exchange your mother for a child called Mira. An escaped slave, it seems.”

Skye’s gaze took in the moonlit landscape. “Were you followed?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Jepson said. His distress won out again as he wrung his hands, tears glistening in his eyes. “There is no time to waste. What do you know of this Mira?”

“He was followed,” Joe said, gripping the hilt of his sword.

“You see something?” Dalton asked.

“The Hunter wouldn’t miss such a golden opportunity,” Joe said. “If he sent a homing pigeon, it didn’t come alone.”

Rattled, Cole squinted into the moonlit dimness beyond their encampment. He saw the shapes of trees and shrubs and the empty expanse of a brushy field, but no movement.

“Is there any chance you were followed?” Skye asked the butler heatedly.

“I suppose,” Jepson replied. “I had no orders to take precautions against such measures. My concern is the safety of Lady Madeline.”

“Get to the horses,” Joe said, hurrying away from the conversation. “Saddle up. We may already be too late.”

They scattered. Cole rushed to his horse, flopped the saddle pad in place, heaved the saddle on top, cinched it, then hopped on one foot while hastily poking the other one at the stirrup. After several clumsy misses, Cole got his foot in place and mounted. Nearby, Dalton fumbled with the straps of his saddle as his horse stamped restively. Cole jumped down and joined his friend, securing the straps while Dalton held the bridle and calmed his horse.

By the time Cole was back on his mare, the others had mounted up as well. Jepson waited nearby, unruffled by all the urgency.

“Go back and check the way you came,” Skye told the butler. “Try to mislead anyone following you. Take them as far from us as possible.”

“You are not yet my mistress,” Jepson reminded her. “My instructions are to—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Joe interrupted, pointing.

Partially screened by shrubs and trees, at the far side of the brushy field, mounted shapes bobbed in the dimness. It took little more than a glance to see that the shadowy forms were riding hard in their direction.

“Enforcers,” Cole said, a jolt of panic coursing through him.

“Lots of them,” Dalton added.

Cole counted at least seven or eight. In Sambria they had encountered three Enforcers and defeated them. But last time Cole and his friends had better weapons and managed to surprise them. There were more Enforcers this time, and they looked ready to fight.

“Ride for the Lost Palace,” Skye urged. “Use the road. Jepson, you’ve served their purpose. Go home!”

The others turned their horses and started riding hard toward the Red Road. Cole tugged the reins and nudged with his heels, but his horse held perfectly still. He kicked a little harder only to discover that the sides of his mare felt hard as a rock. A quick hand to the horse’s neck revealed the problem.

His mount had turned to stone.

## CHAPTER

# 2

## RED GUARD

**T**rying to collect his panicked thoughts, Cole slid off the stone horse, keeping the petrified animal between himself and the oncoming riders. His previous encounter with Enforcers had taught him that they had shaping abilities. In Elloweer that meant they were enchanters, capable of creating illusions and changing living things. Cole recalled the soldier, Russell, who had survived an encounter with Morgassa because an Enforcer had turned him to stone.

That explained the fate of his horse.

Dalton and the others were racing out of sight. The other horses all appeared to be fine. Cole was glad they were getting away but terrified at being left behind. Would his friends notice he wasn't with them? How long before he became the next statue?

Everything went dark. Cole blinked and strained his eyes, but there was absolutely no light. He could hear the thundering approach of the mounted Enforcers.

Fear threatened to suffocate him. Fighting the impulse to run blindly, Cole battled to stay calm. The sudden blackness had to be some sort of illusion. He kept a hand on the stone horse to retain a sense of his location. The Enforcers pounded nearer.

When they had fought Morgassa, wearing the animal masks had prevented her from working changings on them. If a mask could frustrate Morgassa, it should provide plenty of protection from the powers of some Enforcers.

Reaching out in the blackness, Cole felt the saddle. None of the gear had turned to stone, which made sense, since changings only worked on living things. The mask was in a saddlebag on the other side of the petrified horse. To get it would mean exposing himself to the oncoming riders. Would the darkness hide him, or could they see through it? Maybe it wasn't darkness. Maybe he had lost his sight.

Cole ducked under his horse and blindly fumbled open the saddlebag. He yanked out the mask and hesitated for a second.

The last time he wore the mask he had been terribly wounded by Morgassa. He had abandoned the mountain lion form on the brink of death. Might the mountain lion have recovered somewhat? Could it already be dead? What if the mountain lion form was still horribly injured? If that was the case, Cole supposed he could quickly take the mask off again.

As he placed the mask over his face, a flurry of disorienting sensations overwhelmed him. Cole tipped, spun, and grew.

Suddenly Cole stood on four paws. He felt balanced, and calmer. The new form was familiar and most welcome. With his heightened hearing and smell, Cole knew the position of each of the oncoming riders. Their mounts smelled peculiar. Cole could sense they had been changed. No natural horses were so large and strong.

It felt as if his previous injuries had never occurred. No soreness lingered. Cole supposed that made sense—when wearing the mask, *he* was the cougar. It didn't exist elsewhere. The wounded mountain lion had been erased the instant he removed the mask. When he put the mask back on, it had changed him into a healthy mountain lion, not a wounded one. That meant he could heal any injury to his cougar form simply by taking the mask off and replacing it! He wished he had known that when they fought Morgassa.

Cole's first instinct was to attack the riders. But what about his friends? They needed to know the masks were safe to use. Jace's wolf and Skye's bear had been badly wounded as well. If they hesitated to put on the masks, the Enforcers might work changings on them.

Powerful paws pulling at the ground, Cole bolted after his friends, thrilled by the rapid acceleration. He rushed ahead low and fast, muscles churning. No regular mountain lion was this large and strong. No ordinary mountain lion was this fast. Cole knew from experience that he could maintain a full sprint all day without tiring.

Cole swiftly exited the dark patch and once again could add sight to his other senses. Glancing back, he saw a black sphere that reflected no moonlight concealing his stone horse and the surrounding area. The Enforcers rode hard, but despite the impressive speed of their enhanced mounts, Cole was faster than them. Leafy forms of shrubs and trees whipped by as he plunged forward through the gloom.

Before long, Cole reached the Red Road. Benefiting from a head start, his friends galloped away on the smooth pavement. All except one. Dalton had halted his horse and was looking back. He waved when he saw Cole.

Cole dashed to Dalton. He was glad his friend had noticed him missing, but stopping his horse had put Dalton in greater peril. The Enforcers were close behind.

“Put on your mask,” Cole cried. “It’s your best protection.”

Dalton started digging in his saddlebag. Cole did his best not to notice how tasty his friend and his horse smelled.

With the Enforcers closing in, Cole sprinted past Dalton. It didn’t take him long to catch up to the others. The Enforcers would soon overtake their ordinary horses without much trouble.

“Use the masks!” Cole called. “Our animal forms aren’t hurt!”

Looking back, Cole saw a dark sphere where Dalton had been. Cole slowed and was about to turn back when a huge bull charged out of the blackness.

Cole let his friend catch up, then rushed to rejoin the others. While still riding, they were putting on their masks. Tumbling from her horse, Skye became a huge, shaggy bear. Jace transformed into an enormous wolf. As Mira reached into her saddlebag, her horse slowed and turned to stone beneath her. Cole and Dalton stopped to stay with her.

Mira put on her mask and dropped to the ground as a bighorn sheep. After reining in his horse, Joe was the last to change form. He hadn’t worn a mask before, so he used Twitch’s eagle.

Everything went dark again. Growling, Cole spun to face the Enforcers. Sound and smell told him exactly where the nearest horse was charging. Attacking low, Cole dove into the legs, biting down with his powerful jaws and swiping with his claws. The large mount was moving at great speed, and though legs and hooves crashed into Cole, making him flip and slide, the mutant horse got the worst of it, pitching forward violently onto the

pavement. The rider went down hard, armor clanging and scraping against the Red Road, and Skye fell upon him savagely.

In his wolf form, Jace took out the next horse much as Cole had done. Before the rider could rise, Dalton came at him with his horns lowered, goring and trampling him.

Cole rolled over and crouched for another attack, but the other riders were swerving off the road. Six remained on their mounts, fanning out. Strange tingles sparked across his hide, and Cole realized that changings were being cast against him and failing. As expected, the changing caused by the mask was too potent for other changings to take hold.

Something lanced into his side, and Cole swiveled to discover a crossbow bolt protruding from his ribs. By the sudden difficulty in his breathing, Cole knew it had punctured a lung. He let out an angry yowl, noticing as he did how easy it was to switch from his human voice to his cougar growl. Skye let out a roar as well, deeper and more rumbling than Cole's.

The darkness lifted, revealing that all of the Enforcers had bows or crossbows trained on them and were firing at top speed. An arrow hit Jace in the neck, and two already protruded from Skye. In his eagle shape, Joe soared upward, flying out of range.

Skye tore off her mask, and immediately stone walls appeared between the horsemen and their targets. Cole knew the stony seemings were intangible, but at least they would make aiming difficult. He dodged to the side and pulled off his mask. His world spun and flipped, and he returned to two legs, but no sooner had he become himself again than he replaced the mask, passing through another whirlwind of sensation to emerge as an uninjured mountain lion.

Beside him, Jace did likewise. Still in her human form, Skye retreated down the road on foot. "Run!" she called. "Make for the palace."

The Enforcers rode forward through the stone walls, and Skye covered their heads with wooden crates. They batted futilely at the illusions. Cole lingered, ready to attack again.

Mira crouched near Skye, allowing her to climb aboard. Once Skye had mounted, the big ram took off down the road. Cole felt more tingling as additional changings failed to alter him. Their remaining horses turned to stone. Deciding to forgo more attacks and follow Mira, Cole turned on the

speed, exhilarating in the stretch and pull of running as a cougar. Jace and Dalton sprinted beside him.

Skye put on her mask, rolling off Mira to become a bear again. A glance back told Cole that as soon as Skye replaced her mask, the illusionary crates had dissipated. Skye could only maintain seemings while in her human form.

Once again the Enforcers took up the pursuit. Cole pushed to his maximum speed, his paws slipping a little on the smooth pavement. The Enforcers charged after them, gradually losing ground.

Up ahead, four mounted Enforcers rushed onto the road. Two of them held a flaming net between them, barring the way. Another readied a huge bow, while the fourth leveled a lance at them. But Cole didn't smell the horses, or the Enforcers, or the fire, though he heard it crackling.

"Fakes!" Jace shouted.

"Seemings," Skye agreed.

The closer Cole came to the Enforcers, the more certain he became that they had no scent. He and his friends barreled through the insubstantial Enforcers and continued down the road. Dalton laughed, Jace gave a quick howl, and Cole let out a snarling roar.

A rearward glance showed the Enforcers even farther behind, allowing Cole to wonder where the chase might end. Would they take the Red Road all the way into the Lost Palace? Putting themselves back into Trillian's power could prove more dangerous than fighting the Enforcers. What if the gates at the end of the road were closed? That would force a showdown unless they veered off to one side and kept running. Might Trillian send help? What if the help he sent turned into even bigger trouble?

Settling into a steady sprint, Cole let his worries get swallowed by the joy of running. Something about being a mountain lion made it much easier to tune out fear. He wasn't fleeing in terror—it felt like a race, and he was confident that he could keep stretching his lead.

"Why run?" Jace complained, dashing at Cole's left. "They want a fight. Let's give it to them."

"I feel the impulse too," Dalton said from the other side. "My bull side wants to turn around and plow through them."

"It's not just my wolf side," Jace replied. "We could take them."

"They have pretty good aim with those bows," Cole said. "They didn't miss many shots until Skye put up those walls."

“It would be harder for them to shoot us if they were dead,” Jace growled. “They’re made of meat. Let’s eat them.”

Cole didn’t want to admit how tempting that sounded.

“Keep running,” Skye called back from a few paces in front of them. “These Enforcers will give Trillian something to worry about besides capturing us.”

“Nobody is going to capture us with these masks on,” Jace said.

“Remember the sky castle rules,” Mira said. “Don’t fight when you can run. Why risk arrows bringing us down if we can get away?”

“She’s right,” Cole said.

“Whatever,” Jace said. “Is it bad to hope we get cornered?”

“It’s not healthy,” Cole said, though he also felt the strong urge to fight. What if Skye returned to her normal form and raised some illusions so they could attack out of hiding? The Enforcers would be down before they knew what hit them.

The conversation ended. They ran onward in silence, the rumble of hoofbeats receding.

In the moonlit distance the Lost Palace rose into view. The skeletal castle looked like it had barely survived a bombing raid, but Cole knew that for anyone who passed the front gate, the charred building became a shimmering wonder of pearl and platinum. Cole had never figured out whether the real version was the scorched ruin or the fairy-tale palace. Maybe they were both seemings.

“Riders,” Mira said.

Peering ahead along the road, Cole counted at least ten riders approaching, shrunken by the distance. “Another illusion?” he asked.

“They’re pretty far off,” Skye said. “I think they’re real.”

“Red Guard or more Enforcers?” Dalton asked.

“It’s hard to recognize color in the moonlight,” Skye replied. “They seem to be coming from Trillian’s prison.”

Joe came swooping back from the direction of the Lost Palace. “Red Guard!” he called. “Twelve of them.”

“Think they’re here to help?” Dalton asked.

“If not, it’s their funeral,” Jace said.

“Leave the road when they get near,” Skye said. “If they ride past us, we’ll know they’re after our foes.”



Cole had heard that the Red Guard were dangerous, though on his previous visit to the Lost Palace he had only seen a few people besides Trillian. But that proved nothing. Other members of the Red Guard could have been out on assignment, or they could have been hiding.

Running at top speed, Cole watched as the galloping riders rapidly drew closer. Still charging hard, Skye led Cole and the others off the road as the riders came near. With hardly a glance to the side, the riders raced by them, except for a woman who slowed her chestnut stallion to a stop. Coldly beautiful, she gazed down at Cole and his friends as they also came to a standstill.

Cole recognized her. It was Hina, the woman who had escorted him around the Lost Palace.

“What are your intentions?” Skye asked.

Hina turned and looked down the Red Road, where her fellow guardsmen were about to engage the Enforcers. She waved a hand, and the number of guardsmen suddenly tripled.

“Are any of them real?” Cole asked.

“Eleven,” Hina said, her voice calm and rich.

“Should we go help?” Jace asked.

“Not necessary,” Hina assured him.

Just before the clusters of horsemen collided, Hina made a curt gesture, and for a moment the Red Road beneath the oncoming Enforcers flapped like a towel in the wind. All but one of the Enforcers went down in a calamitous tumble as the Red Guard reached them.

Cole watched as the Red Guard cut down the single Enforcer who remained mounted and wheeled to engage the fallen ones. It was hard to catch many details. The skirmish ended quickly.

“You know why I’m here?” Skye asked Hina.

“Naturally,” the silver-haired enchanter responded. “My master welcomes you. He laments the passing of Callista, but believes you have the potential to surpass her in many ways.”

“The others in my party have business elsewhere,” Skye said.

“We know,” Hina said. “He’ll allow it. He would like the other heiresses to come out of hiding. I will accompany your friends to the edge of Elloweer, where Zeropolis begins.”

“You?” Mira challenged.

“The masks will enable you to elude your pursuers and get to Zeropolis,” Hina said. “But someone must bring the masks back. They are too valuable to leave Elloweer.”

Nine of the Red Guard came trotting back down the Red Road. One pair of riders held a dark-armored captive between them by his arms. The injured Enforcer jogged alongside the horses, struggling to keep up. A second pair held another prisoner. First one of the Enforcers stopped jogging and let them drag him, then the other.

“We lost two men,” Hina said. “But we gained two captives. My master is studying their minds. Upon finding you, they sent three of their number back to report. The messengers split up and rode hard. This was one of many search parties. They did not expect to find you here. Had they known, they would have sent more men.”

“Seemed like a lot,” Cole said.

“The Hunter has learned respect for you,” Hina said. “As has the High King. Many resources are now bent on finding Mira and bringing her in. This was a relatively minor show of force.”

“You can hear Trillian from out here?” Dalton asked.

“As long as I remain on the Red Road,” Hina said.

“What of my mother?” Skye asked. “Have they information about her?”

“She lives, so far as these men know,” Hina replied. “Trillian suggests that the best thing you can do to help her would be to let your companions take the chase to another kingdom. The farther away Mira goes, the less relevant your mother becomes.”

“I wish I could see her,” Skye said. “Get a message to her.”

“You will,” Hina said. “All in good time.”

“Does Trillian really want us to find the other princesses?” Jace wondered. “Or does he just want the masks?”

“Both,” Hina replied. “The masks are the greatest legacy left behind by Callista. Those in her home must be protected as well. And my master wishes you well on your journey. With the masks, crossing Elloweer should be quick.”

“You want us to wear the masks until we reach Zeropolis?” Cole asked.

“My master insists upon it,” Hina said. “Reinforcements will come searching for you. The speed afforded by the masks will baffle them. They are your best chance of shaking the Hunter off your trail for a time.”

“Does Trillian know much about the Hunter?” Cole asked.

“Not directly, but he knows of him,” Hina replied. “The Hunter is among the most competent Enforcers. He now has knowledge of your whereabouts, which would normally be enough for him to ensnare you. But he doesn’t know about the masks.”

Joe landed on a nearby limb. “The Enforcers sent some riders back,” he reported. “I tried to chase them and got shot in the wing. I took the mask off and put it back on, and they gained a lot of ground on me, splitting up. I don’t think I can stop them alone.”

“No matter,” Hina said. “The information they bring to the Hunter will mislead him. Using your masks, we’ll reach Zeropolis inside of four days.”

“We?” Joe asked.

“We’ll fill you in,” Mira said. “Looks like Hina is coming with us.”

“We should make haste,” Hina said. “Skye? Do you mind if I borrow your bear?”

## CHAPTER

# 3

## BORDER

The next days passed in a trance of constant motion. Having assumed the form of a bear, Hina led the way. Cole lost all desire to speak, focusing instead on the terrain beneath his paws, the smells and sounds of the wilderness, and the rapture of tireless running.

The sun rose. The sun set. Moons traversed the sky as the stars reeled. Cole dashed over boulders, splashed through rivers, knifed through forests, and raced across plains. Diverse landscapes came and went.

Joe scouted above them, ranging far and wide on his inexhaustible wings. But Cole wasn't sure the eagle's vigilance was necessary. Hina seemed to have a sense for avoiding danger. She knew which passes would take them through the mountains, what routes among the reeds would avoid the mires, and where the rivers could be safely forded. Maybe it was sharp instincts, but Cole suspected she had roamed Elloweer extensively and knew the most remote paths.

From start to finish they never saw or smelled a human, let alone a human settlement. No threatening predators crossed their way. Of course, Cole suspected there weren't many predators who would be in a hurry to tangle with a huge mountain lion, wolf, bear, ram, and bull racing along at unreal speed.

At first Cole felt urges to eat or drink out of habit, particularly when they crossed a clear brook or he smelled a tasty deer. But as he denied those urges to keep running, he realized they were remembered needs, not current ones.

And then they stopped.

It was a grassy glade sheltered by surrounding trees. The sun shined high overhead. Hina pulled off her mask, transforming from a bear back into a beautiful woman.

“We have reached the edge of Elloweer, not far from Post 121,” Hina reported. “This is the destination Joe requested shortly before we departed. Please remove your masks.”

Cole paced instead. It was strange to stop running. Off-putting. It was even stranger to think of reverting to human form. What was the hurry? He sensed no people or human settlements nearby. Couldn't they proceed as animals a little longer?

Dalton was not a bull anymore. Joe landed and removed his eagle mask. Mira became a person instead of a bighorn sheep.

They all looked so small and vulnerable. Defenseless. And strangely appetizing.

“Come on, Cole,” Mira said. “Take it off.”

Cole thought about speaking, but it seemed burdensome. His mouth felt too lazy to form words. Instead he yawned. Then he inhaled the scents of the surrounding forest: old wood decaying, a family of possums, the dung of an elk, leaves and brush and dirt and stone.

His eyes strayed to distant peaks. Why stop here? He could keep running. His many problems felt distant while running.

“Lose the mask, Cole,” Jace said. “Don't let it beat you.”

When had Jace removed his mask? Cole remembered not wanting to take his mask off before. Long ago. He had given in and removed it. Should he again? Or had that been a mistake?

If he removed the mask, Hina would take it away. How he would miss being a mountain lion! The strength, the speed, the alertness. He could spend his whole life like this. Perhaps this was his destiny.

“Don't forget Jenna,” Dalton said. “Don't forget our friends. We have to find them and get home.”

Cole blinked.

Jenna!

Of course, she was lost, a slave. He had to help her! That was why he had run through the wilderness—to get to Zeropolis in the hope of finding her. And to help Mira find her sister Constance.

Why was he waiting? He couldn't remain a mountain lion. People needed him. He had a greater purpose.

Not without some regret, Cole reached up and pulled off the mask. He reared back, giddily whirled, and abruptly stood on two feet with the mask in his hand.

As the leonine instincts lost their grip, he realized how close he had been to losing himself in the mask. Even now, restored to his true form, he felt tempted to put it back on.

The rest of the group stood in a semicircle, staring at him.

"You okay?" Dalton asked.

Cole swallowed. It was good to focus on his best friend. His mind felt clearer. He really had been at the brink of running away for a moment. He held out the mask toward Hina. "I'm better now."

Hina came to him and accepted his mask. In the sunlight, her silvery hair looked almost metallic. Her beauty was so flawless that it looked crafted. Maybe it was, Cole realized. Changings? Seemings? Who knew?

"This is where I leave you," Hina said. "We're at the border near your desired outpost."

"I saw Post 121 from the air," Joe confirmed. "When I tried to fly that way, I bumped against a barrier. Felt hard as stone."

"You can't leave Elloweer with these masks on," Hina said.

Staring at the stacked masks in her hands, Cole frowned slightly. He had used his power to make the Jumping Sword and Jace's golden rope work here in Elloweer. Did his power have the potential to make the masks work elsewhere? There might be an unseen boundary, but what if he took off the mask, crossed the border, recharged it, and put it back on? Cole felt for his power, even just a hint of it, but came up empty. Since he couldn't access his ability, there was no way to experiment with the masks.

Cole considered the hold the mask had started to have on him. He had felt so content as a mountain lion that he hadn't wanted to return to his real life. It seemed sort of silly now, but just a few moments ago, he had been ready to run off into the wilderness. Callista had warned that the more they used the masks, the greater power the animal forms would exert over the wearers. Maybe not having the masks anymore was a good thing.

"I ranged widely across this area and saw no enemy activity on the Elloweer side," Joe said. "We seem to have given the Enforcers the slip for

now. I'm sure the Zeropolis side will have the standard patrolmen to deal with."

"Would you like me to wait here a day with the masks?" Hina asked. "In case you need to retreat?"

"I don't know how much longer I can wear the mask without staying a wolf forever," Jace said. "I can tell Cole was feeling the pull too."

"We all were," Mira said. "But if it's between getting caught and using the masks again, I'd find a way to fight off my sheep instincts."

"We'd appreciate knowing you were here for a day," Joe told Hina. "I have no plans to come back this way, but if we get discovered, retreat might become our only lifeline."

"This time tomorrow?" Hina asked.

Shading his eyes, Joe squinted at the sky. "Could we say sundown tomorrow? By then I should know if we can get transportation into the city."

"I will wait until sundown tomorrow," Hina affirmed. "If I do not hear from you by then, I will assume you've gotten safe passage into the city."

"Post 121 isn't the city?" Cole asked.

"It's an outpost of the city," Joe said. "There are currently one hundred thirty-eight outposts in operation, connected to the city via monorail. Sometimes the outposts grant access to resources like mines or forests. Sometimes they serve as a way station when traveling to other kingdoms."

"What does this outpost do?" Cole asked.

"It isn't far from a salt pan where minerals are harvested," Joe said. "It's also near Elloweer, obviously, and the small town of Eastmont. I suggested this outpost to Hina because it's farther north than necessary. From the Lost Palace, the nearest outpost would have been 93. We could have strayed a little to the south to Post 88, or north to 76. Or even farther north to 84. Keep going northeast after 84 and you end up here—Post 121. Not the most likely destination."

"Is there any sense to the numbers?" Jace wondered.

"It's the order the outposts were added," Joe replied.

"I don't get something," Dalton said. "Is Zeropolis the city or the kingdom?"

"Both," Joe said. "The city is the kingdom. The outposts are extensions of the city. When people in Zeropolis talk about the city, they mean the huge cluster of buildings in the center of the kingdom where most people live. I

think the intent is for the city to one day fill the kingdom. The city is huge, but nowhere near that goal. Maybe someday. For now, using the monorails can get you to most areas of the kingdom.”

“When you say monorails . . . ,” Cole said.

“I mean monorails like we have back home,” Joe said. “But more advanced than any I know about. More like bullet trains. Zeropolites do amazing things with magnetics. And they can store energy in crystals. It’s so efficient. No fossil fuels required. They energize the crystals with shaping, and create many of their materials using shaping as well, so the majority of their technologies aren’t transferable to other kingdoms, or back to Earth, either.”

“I’m not from Outside,” Jace reminded everyone. “What’s a monorail? What do you mean by magnetics?”

“Have you seen a magnet?” Joe asked. “It sticks to certain metals?”

“I’ve fiddled with magnets,” Jace said. “They had some at Skyport.”

“So you know they can attract or repel each other,” Joe said.

“Right. Sometimes they snap together. But when you face them a certain way, there’s a spongy invisible force that keeps them apart. You can push them around.”

“Exactly,” Joe said. “Now imagine a vehicle like the autocoach, except much longer, suspended on a magnetic cushion, and propelled by magnetic forces as well. It rides on a long, elevated track. That’s a monorail.”

“Sounds slick,” Jace said. “Is it fast?”

“Like you’ve never seen,” Joe assured him.

“What now?” Cole asked. “Do we just walk over to the outpost? You said something about patrolmen. What’s Zeropolis like?”

“Yeah,” Jace agreed. “Give us the lowdown. I knew some stuff about Elloweer. But I don’t know much about Zeropolis.”

“I still have my slavemark,” Dalton reminded everyone. “Will that cause trouble?”

“We’ll all need identification cards,” Joe said. “The government in Zeropolis loves IDs. None of you have been to Zeropolis before, am I right?”

Everyone but Mira shook their heads.

“I went once as a kid,” Mira said. “I might have been five. I remember riding the monorail. And the tall buildings.”

“Were you issued an ID card?” Joe asked.

“I don’t think so,” Mira said. “I was with Mom and Dad.”



“Not letting your identity leak is essential,” Joe said. “If you were issued an ID, the checkpoints have access to it, but they need to know where to look. They don’t have biometrics to help them.”

“Biometrics?” Cole asked.

“You know, fingerprints, iris scanners, facial-recognition software,” Joe explained. “Those advancements might be coming, but they hadn’t hit when I left. All a troublemaker would have to go on is a seventy-year-old picture of a five-year-old. Miracle Pemberton is supposed to be dead. We’ll make up fake names for all of you, just in case word of us has spread. Considering you’re all minors, and outsiders coming to Zeropolis for the first time, I should be able to get fresh IDs for all of you.”

“What about my mark?” Dalton reminded him.

“You’ll play the role of our slave,” Joe said. “Technically we should have papers to prove ownership, but that sort of detail gets missed all the time. If it comes to it, we’ll try a bribe.”

“Do you have an ID?” Jace asked.

“I’ve got three,” Joe said. “A luxury of having friends in the Unseen.”

“Fake IDs?” Cole checked.

“One is authentic,” Joe said. “Two are false. Top quality. The real one is no good to me anymore. As long as nobody has combed through the millions of other ID photos on record to find the duplicate faces and flag the false names, I should be fine. Wanted members of the Unseen get away with it all the time.”

“What should my name be?” Jace mused.

“Something you’ll remember,” Joe said. “Something that’ll roll off your tongue.”

“Drop the *J*,” Cole said. “Be Ace.”

“Too close,” Jace said.

“Maybe Face?” Cole went on. “Or Vase. Or Outer Space.”

“Your name is going to be Black Eye if you don’t watch it,” Jace threatened.

“Then you’re going to be Mr. Overreactor,” Cole replied. “Or maybe Sore Fist.”

Joe pulled out a couple of ID cards. Dark blue and metallic, they looked about the size of driver’s licenses and had different pictures of him. One had a mustache.

“Should I be Harvey Michaels?” he asked. “Or Walt Boone?”

Cole held out a hand. “Let me see one.” Joe placed an ID in his palm. Cole found the thin card heavier than it looked. The name Walt Boone was printed in silver letters above a long number sequence. A fancy insignia in the upper corner looked like three overlapping moons behind a tall, slender building.

“Sweet ’stache,” Dalton said, checking out the ID. “Be Walt.”

“If I’m Walt, then Cole, Jace, and Mira will be my niece and nephews. We’ll all be Boones to keep it simple.”

“And who am I?” Dalton asked.

“The slave,” Jace said. “Rupert.”

“I vote you name yourselves,” Joe said. “We should get going. You can think about it while we walk.”

“We still don’t know much about Zeropolis,” Jace argued. “I don’t want to go in blind. What if somebody questions us?”

“Security is loose in the outposts,” Joe said. “Things aren’t as organized. If somebody gives you trouble, just be vaguely honest. You came from Elloweer and don’t know anything. We won’t have much to worry about until we try to board the monorail.”

“Unless the Hunter sent a message to watch for us,” Mira said. “Don’t forget, he nabbed Ansel, who drew pictures of Cole, and probably the rest of us too. Our faces could be public knowledge.”

“It’s possible,” Joe said. “I just don’t see Enforcers working directly with local authorities. They seldom cooperate with legionnaires or guardsmen. They prefer to operate quietly.”

“What’s the shaping like in Zeropolis?” Jace asked.

“Their shapers are called tinkers,” Mira said. “They shape useful materials. They manipulate energy. And they use those resources to create all sorts of things.”

“The pros call themselves technomancers,” Joe said. “They can replicate just about anything we had in the world I came from. And they do lots of things we can’t.”

“Computers?” Cole asked.

“Yeah, but they limit access to some of that stuff,” Joe said. “They don’t always push as far as they could. Some supercomputer went haywire a long time ago. It trashed the city. They don’t want a repeat. Also, the Grand

Shaper, Abram Trench, worries about keeping control, so he heavily restricts the use of lethal weapons and communication devices.”

“What’s a computer?” Jace asked.

“It’s a machine with lots of abilities,” Dalton said.

“It can almost think,” Cole added.

“It’s like a really complicated abacus,” Joe deadpanned.

“This place sounds strange,” Jace said.

“To you most of all,” Joe agreed. “For Dalton and Cole, some parts of it will almost feel like home. Can we go? I’d like to get settled and plan for tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Jace said.

Mira went to Hina. “Thank you for guiding us here,” Mira said. “And for waiting around in case we need to escape.”

“I’m on an errand from my master,” Hina replied. “I would not disappoint him. I wish you good fortune in finding your sister.”

Joe extended an arm eastward. “This way, right?”

“Correct,” she said.

They started walking with Joe in the lead. Cole fell in beside Dalton.

“Cole,” Hina said. “A word?”

They all paused. Cole looked back at her, feeling slightly suspicious. What did she want? What if she put on the bear mask and kidnapped him? Trillian had shown interest in his abilities, and Hina had all the masks now. There wouldn’t be much the others could do.

“It’ll just take a moment,” she assured him. “You can catch up.”

“Okay,” Cole said, with a nod at Joe.

The others started walking, but Dalton lingered.

“What is it?” Cole asked, taking a couple of steps toward Hina.

“My master has a message for you,” she said.

“Okay.”

“When you stood on the Red Road, he could sense that your power is blocked. He wanted me to tell you that it may not be easy, but you can get it back. I was asked to recommend that you accept none of the apparent limits to shaping here in the Outskirts. And he wanted me to convey that although your current focus is to get home, the Outskirts may not survive without your help.”

For a moment Cole forgot to breathe. How could the fate of the Outskirts

depend on him? It was absurd, right? This place was his prison. It would be hard enough to find his friends and get home. Maybe impossible. What game was Trillian playing?

Cole glanced over at Dalton, who could hear the conversation. His friend raised his eyebrows.

“That’s all?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Hina said.

Cole gave a disbelieving laugh. “How am I supposed to save the Outskirts?”

Hina gave a slight bow. “I have shared his message.”

“Okay,” Cole said, suddenly wishing he could speak to Trillian again. Why would the torivor leave something so important so unexplained? Did Trillian want to lure him back to the Lost Palace? Might he have good reason to do so? Did the torivor know techniques that could help him regain his lost ability? How sure was Trillian that the Outskirts needed his help? Was it just a manipulation? Was it because Mira needed him? “Thanks.”

Hina sat down cross-legged, the masks on her lap.

Cole jogged away with Dalton, hurrying to catch up to the others as questions continued to occupy him.

## CHAPTER

# 4

## POST 121

No marker announced the border between Elloweer and Zeropolis, but Cole knew they had crossed when electric tingles raced through him and his ears popped. “Feel that?” Cole asked the others.

“Yep,” Dalton said, rubbing his ears.

“Welcome to Zeropolis,” Mira said.

“I didn’t feel squat,” Jace said.

“Nobody ever accused you of being sensitive,” Cole said.

“I didn’t feel much either,” Joe said. “Maybe a little tickle.”

In a corner of his mind, Cole had wondered if the crossing might help undo the changing Morgassa had worked on him before she died. Was it unreasonable to hope that whatever blockade she had raised to divide him from his power would be destroyed by leaving Elloweer? But as he searched inside, he still found no hint of his ability. His power remained out of reach.

“Weird,” Dalton said. “I can’t make a seeming.”

“Did you expect to be the only exception?” Jace asked.

“No,” Dalton said. “It just cut off so suddenly. I can still feel my power. It’s there. But if I try to make a seeming, I can’t even manage a spark. It’s frustrating.”

Jace pulled his little golden rope from his pocket. “Is it kind of like having a really cool weapon that no longer works?”

“Pretty much,” Dalton said.

“I think we all get the feeling,” Jace said.

The trees thinned and prairie land came into view. As the group exited the forest, there was no missing Post 121. The outpost was much larger than Cole expected. He had pictured an isolated monorail stop with a few buildings and some mules. Instead, the community spread across the prairie for quite a distance, a windswept jumble of low, fenceless structures.

The strangest dwellings looked almost like playground equipment—tubes and globes of colored plastic joined together in odd combinations. There were also boxy apartments made from concrete blocks, flimsy shacks composed of tin panels, earthy structures of adobe and plaster, patchwork pavilions of weathered hides, log cabins, canvas tents, and shanties cobbled together from scraps of wood and metal. The styles varied at random. With few trees or bushes in view, the only landscaping seemed to be the natural dirt and brush of the prairie.

Above the sprawling mishmash of haphazard architecture, the monorail track and station stood out as the glaring landmarks of advanced civilization. Shining like polished platinum, the lofty track overshadowed the chaotic neighborhoods, its metallic whiteness gently curving away into the distance, supported by pillars at regular intervals. The station also looked very modern, a lustrous construction of glass and metal.

Besides the monorail track and station, not many structures in town surpassed two stories. Joe explained that the large, weathered, egg-shaped building was the power facility, where the main energy crystals for the outpost were housed. He also mentioned that the two cylinders on the hillside were water towers. A few windmills of varied design poked up here and there. Cole's favorite kind of looked like an upside-down eggbeater.

The closer they got to the outpost, the more vehicles came into view. One looked like a cross between a dune buggy and a monster truck, rolling around on swollen tires. Another was a motorcycle with wheels as wide as overturned barrels. A spiderlike contraption prowled around on slender legs, while the driver sat atop the body yanking levers. Some vehicles had treads like a tank. The roads Cole saw were rough pathways carved by frequent travel. Without decent roads, he supposed the vehicles needed to be hardy.

“It looks like people made stuff out of whatever they could find,” Dalton said.

“True enough,” Joe said. “The outposts only get materials from the city by monorail. Anything else they make themselves. The tinkers can get pretty

creative.”

Cole glanced back at the woods, where Hina waited unseen. He wondered if he would ever make it back to Elloweer. Not for some time, he decided, since he knew Jenna wasn't there, and he had already rescued Dalton. He might have to go back one day to free Jill. And if he got totally stuck finding a way home, it might be worth risking another conversation with Trillian.

“We'll have to change our money,” Joe said. “Some of the outposts will do business with ringers, but once we hit the city, it's all credits.”

“Like credit cards?” Dalton asked.

“Kind of,” Joe said. “Your credits are linked to your ID card. It's one of the instances where the Grand Shaper allows computerized communication. I think he does it so he can freeze anyone's money whenever he wants. It's a powerful control tactic.”

“Then we should keep some ringers just in case,” Jace said. “We can always transfer more to credits later.”

“You're thinking like a survivor,” Joe complimented

“Don't jinx me,” Jace said.

Cole patted his chest, where he had tied his ringers. They jangled softly. It was a convenient way to store the little rings that served as coins in the Outskirts. As a group, they had a lot of money. Before parting with the Rogue Knight, he had restored all of the ringers he had taken from them when he robbed the wagon train. It meant they should be able to afford some comforts in the city.

“I want to get a spider car,” Dalton said. “That thing is cool.”

“Too wobbly,” Jace said. “I'll take one of the big ones with the treads. What powers them?”

“The same source that powers most of Zeropolis,” Joe said. “Harmonic crystals. Also called dynamos, juiced crystals, energy crystals—whatever the name, they're crystals that can store and share vast amounts of energy.”

“Electricity?” Cole asked.

“That's one way to picture it,” Joe said. “I sometimes think of it that way to help me relate. Like electricity, the energy from the crystals can be used to generate heat, motion, light—all sorts of effects. It could be converted into electricity, but that's not usually useful, because it's already in a purer state. Less volatile. And it doesn't need wires.”

“Wireless electricity?” Dalton exclaimed.

“That’s the idea,” Joe said. “Once harmonic crystals are linked, they can share power with one another across great distances. Most of the crystals in Post 121 are linked to the power facility, where sparkers keep a central crystal juiced.”

“Sparkers?” Jace asked.

“Tinkers who specialize in generating energy,” Joe clarified. “It’s a form of shaping.”

“This place is weird,” Jace said.

“You’ll like some of the conveniences,” Joe promised.

Cole fell into step beside Mira. “You seem quiet.”

“Huh?” she replied. “Oh, I was thinking about Costa. My only memories of Zeropolis are as a kid. Everything seemed so big and fancy. Foreign. It’s intimidating to think of finding Costa there. The city is enormous.”

“The outpost is bigger than I expected,” Cole said.

“Maybe. But just wait. The city is by far the biggest in all the Outskirts.”

Cole thought about that. Even compared to the cities back home, Carthage had been impressive. So had Merriston. He wondered how Zeropolis would compare against major cities like Phoenix or Los Angeles.

“I wish Honor were here,” Mira murmured.

“She’d be a big help,” Cole said.

“Not just that,” Mira said. “I’ve waited sixty years to see her, then once we finally find each other, we hardly get to spend any time together.”

“She’s looking for Destiny,” Cole reminded her.

“I know,” Mira said. “It’s important to find Tessa. Honor is doing what she always does—her duty. And I’m glad she’s doing it. It just would have been nice to see her for a while. Imagine if right after you found Dalton he had to take off.”

“I get it,” Cole said. “That stinks. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mira said. “I get it too. Sometimes you do what you must. I just miss my sisters.”

“We’ll find Costa,” Cole said. “That’s something you can look forward to. Maybe this time you won’t have to split up right away.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” Mira said wistfully. “What if we weren’t the mascots for a revolution? What if we were just a normal family?”

“You might never know,” Cole said.

Mira gave him a sharp glance. “Too true.”



They began to pass some of the buildings at the fringe of the outpost. The people they saw didn't pay them any mind. Cole was surprised to see a guy wearing blue jeans and a denim jacket.

"Is that guy in jeans?" Cole asked Joe.

"Yeah," he replied. "They make synthetic denim in the city. It's everywhere. They do plenty of things their own way here, but they borrow a lot of ideas from Earth."

"Are there many Outsiders?" Dalton asked.

"That could be part of it," Joe answered. "I've met several. But they also have ways of keeping tabs on our world. Some people in Zeropolis can connect to our Internet."

"The Internet back home?" Cole asked in astonishment.

"They call them thruports," Joe said. "Technically they're illegal. But I know some of the government people use them. And so do some of the Unseen."

"I could e-mail my family?" Dalton asked.

"You could," Joe said. "But they won't open it."

"How can you be sure?" Dalton countered.

"I've tried," Joe said wearily. "I tried and tried. It never worked."

"Who were you trying to reach?" Cole asked.

Joe bit his lower lip. "You remember I told you I left Zeropolis for a reason? I volunteered to go warn Mira?"

"Yeah," Cole said.

"The person I e-mailed most ties into that," Joe said. "You deserve the whole story. What happened could make this more dangerous for all of us. And I learned some things you ought to hear. But not here. Later. For now, let me go change some money to credits. I'll buy us some clothes that won't stand out so much in the city. You guys go check out Gizmo Row."

"What's that?" Jace asked.

"Every outpost has one," Joe said. "They're named after the big one in the city. Gizmo Row is where the tinkers peddle their inventions. Some of the stuff can be useful, and in an outpost near the border, some of the tinkers might be willing to trade in ringers. It should help you kill some time and start to get a feel for Zeropolis. It's also a place where strangers fit in just fine. Just don't buy anything too expensive. And don't let them take you into a back

room. We don't want black-market gear. Not now at least. All we need is to get arrested for buying restricted tech before we even reach the city."

"Okay," Dalton said. "Where do we find it?"

Joe pointed over some of the nearby rooftops. "See the sign on that pole sticking up over there? Blue circle with a sun in the center? That marks Gizmo Row. Head that way. I'll go over to the monorail station and see if I can find a place to turn some ringers into credits. It'll also give me a chance to make sure my fake ID works."

"What if you get nabbed?" Dalton asked.

"It should be fine," Joe said. "I've used Walt Boone before."

"If he gets nabbed, we'll bust him out," Jace said.

"Well . . . ," Joe said. "I appreciate the loyalty, but only if you find a real opportunity. Our top priority is keeping Mira safe. Second is finding Costa. If it comes to it, I want you kids to leave me behind. I wouldn't be able to stand the thought of you getting into trouble trying to help me."

"Let's just try to stay out of trouble to begin with," Mira said, giving Jace a stern look. "That means not creating any of our own."

"Don't look at me," Jace said with a smirk. "I don't start fights. I end them."

"You heard me," Mira said.

"Once you get there, don't leave Gizmo Row," Joe said. "I'll come find you."

"Unless you get arrested," Dalton said.

"Right," Joe said. "Unless I get arrested." Turning, he started toward the monorail station.

Picking up his pace, Jace marched toward the Gizmo Row sign, following a narrow footpath. Mira caught up to him. Cole and Dalton walked together.

"Think we'll find Jenna in Zeropolis?" Dalton wondered.

"I can only guess," Cole said, looking around. "You know all the kids who were sent with you to Elloweer, so she's not there. I started out in Sambria, but never really searched it. She could be in any kingdom besides Elloweer. That means we have a one in four chance she's in Zeropolis."

"Unless she stayed in Junction, between the kingdoms," Dalton said.

"You all went there at first," Cole said. "Did anybody stay?"

"Not that I know of. I'm just trying to cover all the possibilities."

"Hopefully some of Joe's contacts here can help us," Cole said. "Maybe

they can search for her ID card or something.”

“It would be nice to catch a break,” Dalton said.

Up ahead, Mira laughed at something Jace had said, patting him on the arm.

“He’s in heaven right now,” Cole said.

“Jace?”

“He has the biggest crush on her.”

“She’s pretty great.” Dalton paused. “Does it make you think of Jenna?”

Cole inhaled sharply. He usually tried to downplay his feelings for Jenna in front of Dalton, though his friend seemed to see through it. “Yeah. Not that it really matters how I feel about her. She’s my friend. She was kidnapped. I want her safe.”

“What if tomorrow we find out Jenna isn’t in Zeropolis? Do we stay and help Mira, or do we move on to the next kingdom?”

Cole groaned. “I don’t know. Who’s going to help us in the next kingdom?”

“What if Joe and Mira teach us how to contact the Unseen?” Dalton asked. “What if they give us a note or something that lets us get help from the rebels anywhere? Wouldn’t that be faster than sticking with them?”

“Maybe,” Cole said, feeling torn. “Why are you asking now? Because of that message from Trillian?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t been thinking about it,” Dalton said.

“I have. I don’t know. The guy is scary, but it doesn’t mean he’s wrong. Supposedly he can’t lie. Maybe my help really is important to the rebellion. I’ve saved Mira before. What she’s doing matters to this whole world. Her dad is a monster. And his shapecrafters keep building actual monsters. If Mira and her sisters can’t defeat him, this whole world could be doomed.”

“You care about Mira,” Dalton said.

Cole felt unwanted tears sting his eyes. “Of course I do! I care about everybody. I care about her and Twitch and Jace. I care about Jenna and the other kids who got kidnapped with us too. I think me, you, Mira, and Jace make a good team. My first choice would be to find the others with their help. And to help Mira along the way.”

“And save the entire Outskirts,” Dalton said.

“Maybe,” Cole replied softly. “Especially if that means helping Mira.”

“It’s nice to have friends,” Dalton said. “But it gets us into trouble. Her

dad cares a lot more about finding her than he does about us. And helping her find her sisters leads us into ugly situations.”

“So we abandon her?” Cole said.

“I don’t mean we leave her stranded and friendless,” Dalton said. “She has Joe and Jace. I’m sure wherever she goes she’ll find other people to help her, like Skye. People with more skills than we have.”

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “My power was looking pretty useful before it got blocked. Trillian seemed to think it would be crucial.”

“Are you going to let him plan your future?” Dalton asked. “Didn’t you almost get killed the last time you visited him? Didn’t he try to take you prisoner?”

“You think he’s wrong?”

“I think it’s easy to say you can’t lie. What proof do we have? He’s an evil menace they locked up years ago. People avoid him like the plague. He could be telling the truth, Cole. I’m just not in a hurry to believe him.”

Cole thought about it. “I don’t know either. He might have just been trying to control me.”

“What if we find Jenna tomorrow?” Dalton asked. “Let’s say we also have a way home. Do we go? Do we try to find all the other kids first? Do we wait to help Mira?”

Cole had fretted about similar questions. “I honestly don’t know. I’d hate to ditch the other kids. I’d hate to run out on Mira.”

“It’ll be hard to find all of them,” Dalton said. “I don’t even know them all. And sure, this world has problems, but so does ours. That doesn’t mean I rush out and join the army or the Peace Corps so I can personally solve everything. We’re still just kids.”

“You’re saying if we get the chance, we should leave?”

“I’m wondering what you think,” Dalton said.

“I want to help Mira unless it makes no sense to stay with her,” Cole said, feeling the truth of the words as he spoke them. “And I’m going to keep looking for Jenna. I’ll save the other choices for when I actually find Jenna and a way home. Maybe when the time comes, Mira will be fine, and leaving won’t be a big deal. Or maybe we’ll never have the option to go home. Who knows?”

They emerged from the footpath onto the widest road they had seen. Shops and stalls lined both sides of the street. Other merchants sold from carts

or off blankets.

“Welcome to Gizmo Row,” Jace said over his shoulder.

The shops all had open fronts, inviting customers to step close and inspect items or have them demonstrated. The street wasn't packed with people, but a decent crowd of customers moved up and down the rows of storefronts, browsing, buying, and haggling. Cole noticed a lot of denim—jeans, shirts, skirts, and jackets. He wondered if he could find some jeans for himself. Did denim count as a gizmo?

One of the nearest shops looked full of strange aquariums. Closer inspection revealed that they were various types of water purifiers. Most were made from a mix of metal, plastic, and glass.

An older man with a curled mustache grinned from behind a counter at the front of the store. “Water is life,” he said, with a faint accent that Cole couldn't place.

“Don't you guys have water towers?” Cole asked.

“We do today,” he said. “For this I give thanks. Tomorrow?” He gave an indefinite shrug. “I hope so. For the sake of the children. Pause to consider—those towers only provide for the post. What if you go on an excursion?” He patted a small machine. “This condenser will strain water out of the air.” He pointed at another. “Feed this device mud, and cool, clear water will emerge. How can one put a price on such magnificent functionality? Such security against drought? Such profound peace of mind?”

“I bet you found a way,” Cole said.

“For you, a special price,” the man replied, stroking one of his smaller purifiers. “One hundred and fifty credits. I lose money on this. You make me a pauper. But it would pain me if you perished from thirst. I sell it to you as charity.”

“We don't need purifiers,” Jace said, coming up behind Cole and tugging on the back of his shirt. “Come on.”

“Who is this prophet?” the man asked Cole. “How does he know there will be no need for clean water? Would he be so kind as to speak my fortune? Perhaps reveal how I will meet my end?”

“It's a hunch,” Jace said.

The man gave a nod. “May your hunches guide you to prosperity. Consider mentioning my wares to your parents.”

“Will do,” Jace said as he and Cole left the store.

“A purifier could come in handy,” Cole said once they were out of earshot.

“If we were *walking* to the city,” Jace replied. “I have no plans to get lost in the wilderness here. Keep in mind, most of this stuff will fall apart if we take it out of Zeropolis.”

Cole, Jace, Mira, and Dalton moved along the row of shops. One place specialized in vehicle-repair tools, including a variety of jacks. Another shop featured lamps and other decorative lighting. A third had advanced tools like power saws and welding gear. Cole avoided getting close enough for the merchants to engage him.

Until they reached the shop with the robots.

“Whoa!” Cole exclaimed, his feet carrying him into the roomy store without much thought.

“Seriously?” Dalton asked.

Robots large and small moved around the area. Some rolled on wheels; some mimicked animals or insects; a few walked upright. They were mostly made from metal and glass.

A humanoid robot toddled up to Cole, all brassy metal and transparent panels. It was slightly taller than him and had a bronze mask for a face, with lights behind the eyes.

“How may I serve you, master?” the robot asked in a female voice.

“You tell me,” Cole said. “What can you do?”

“I can cook over three hundred meals using standard equipment,” the robot said. “I serve. I clean. I answer doors. I can handle all your domestic needs, freeing up your time for other pursuits.”

“Can you fight off robbers?” Dalton asked.

“I can sound an alarm and get in the way,” the robot replied.

“Can you sing?” Cole asked.

“I can be taught,” the robot replied. “It would require some minor upgrades.”

A husky man sauntered up to Cole. He wore jeans, a white shirt, a denim vest, and what looked like a leather baseball cap with mud flaps on the back. “Don’t tease the domestic bots, kid,” the man said.

“What if I might buy it?” Cole asked defensively.

“You’d start by needing around eighteen thousand credits,” the man said.

“What’s that in ringers?” Cole asked.

“Ringers? You from out of kingdom?”

“You’re right by the border,” Cole said.

The man shook his head. “Kids are talkers these days. They love to yap. I don’t take ringers, boy, but ten credits is roughly one copper ringarole. You’re looking at about four platinum.”

Cole had much more than that but knew it would be foolish to reveal it.

“Why so much glass?” Cole asked.

The man huffed. “Boy, that is grade three bonded crystal. Harder than most alloys, and energy friendly.” He huffed again. “Glass would shatter. I’d like to see you try to break a plate of grade three. That would be comedy.”

Jace stepped in front of Cole. “How much for your hat?”

The guy scowled. “You cracking wise?”

“No,” Jace said in his most sincere voice. “I’m absolutely serious. I’d buy it right now.”

Weighing the reply suspiciously, the man brushed the bill of his cap. “Not for sale. I’ve had this hat for years. Too much sentimental value.”

“Where’d you get it?” Jace asked.

“Ordered it in from the city,” he said. “Place called Headgear. Synthetic leather with a waterproof sealant.”

Jace gave a nod. “Thanks.”

“Do you have anything we might be able to afford?” Dalton asked.

The man took a deep breath. “This is a bot shop. Nothing here comes cheap. It all depends on what you have to spend.”

“What about that little crab-looking guy?” Dalton asked, pointing at a robot skittering around on a countertop in controlled bursts of motion.

“Does that look like a plaything to you?” the man asked. “That’s a workbot. Tinkers use it to track energy flow in vehicles and other systems. It can find and repair damaged panels on a magroad. You’d be amazed by the energy surges it can withstand, the extreme temperatures that fail to bother it.”

“We’re sorry to trouble you,” Mira said, tugging at Dalton.

“Kids love bots,” the man said, waving a hand. “I get it. I don’t have any toybots here. Some of the junkers on the row may have some. I can’t vouch for the quality.”

Cole, Dalton, and Jace followed Mira out. She walked briskly down the road.

“What was the hurry?” Cole asked her quietly. “That place was cool.”

“Other shoppers were listening in on your conversation,” she said. “You were drawing attention. That’s not the goal right now.” She glanced over her shoulder. “We’re being followed.”

Cole turned and saw a grungy guy in denim overalls coming toward them from the direction of the robot shop. He waved when Cole met his eyes and jogged to catch up.

“I don’t know your faces,” he said, his friendliness sounding a little forced.

“We’re from out of town,” Jace said.

“Your folks are letting you wander?” he asked.

“They trust us,” Cole said. “You want something?”

“I’m Wilcox,” the guy said. “I overheard you asking about bots. You kids have ringers?”

“Our parents might,” Jace said.

Wilcox lowered his voice. “I’ve got a shop next street over. There’s some great stuff down on the lower level. Want to check it out for your folks? Bots. Gadgets. Hard to find items. Really fun. Great deals.”

“Why aren’t you at your shop?” Mira asked.

“Everybody comes to Gizmo Row,” Wilcox said. “I watch for clients here.”

“Are a lot of your clients kids?” she asked.

Cole was glad she had called him on it. The guy gave off a shady vibe.

Wilcox frowned. He tapped Dalton on the shoulder. “Noticed this one’s a slave.”

“Our slave,” Mira said.

“Mouthy for a slave,” Wilcox said. “Saw him talking up a storm in there. You have IDs? Papers?”

“None of your business,” Jace said.

“Isn’t it?” Wilcox asked, cocking his head.

“Is there a problem?”

Cole breathed a sigh of relief to see Joe step up behind Wilcox. Joe didn’t look pleased. Wilcox turned to look at him.

“Hey, Dad,” Mira said.

“No problem,” Wilcox said. “The young ones were pestering Chuck in the bot shop. I thought they might enjoy some of my toybots.”

Joe narrowed his eyes. “So you were asking about identification? Who are



you?”

Wilcox gave a smile and a shrug. “Just a fella looking to make a few credits. Good afternoon.” He ambled away casually, hands in his pockets.

“That was good timing,” Mira muttered.

“Looked like it,” Joe said. “He was running some sort of scam. There’s plenty of that in Zeropolis. Maybe I shouldn’t have left you alone. Anyhow, I’ve got a bunch of credits on my card, and I know where we’re going to stay tonight. We’ll catch the monorail in the morning.”

## CHAPTER

# 5

## GWEN

Joe booked a pair of adjoining rooms on the second floor of a big inn made of concrete blocks. One room contained four narrow beds, the other two. All of the beds had mattresses that looked and felt like the mattresses Cole remembered from back home, though a bit thinner. A couple of cowhide rugs softened up the cement floor.

“An actual faucet,” Dalton said, standing by the sink. “With hot and cold running water.”

“A toilet too,” Cole added.

Dalton twisted on a faucet and let water run over his hand. “What a miracle.”

“The showers are in a common area down the hall,” Joe said. “They have one washroom for men and another for women. But in the city, we’ll have showers in our rooms.”

“Sweet,” Cole said. “This might be my favorite kingdom.”

They had gathered in the room with four beds. Mira would sleep in the other one when the time came.

Joe sat on the edge of one of the beds, hunched forward, hands folded. He cleared his throat. “It’s time I tell you my story.”

Cole perked up. “Why you wanted to get away from Zeropolis?”

Joe nodded. “That and more. As long as we’re together, the mess I made for myself here could affect us all. Cole, Dalton, in a lot of ways, we’re in the same boat. I tried to get back home, and you deserve to hear about the

problems involved.” He rubbed his thighs and chuckled. “I hardly know where to begin. Some people know pieces of this, but I haven’t told all of it to anyone.”

“You’re from Monterey?” Dalton prompted.

“Right,” Joe said with a smile that was almost a grimace. “That’s a place to start. I’m, what, thirty-four now? I was thirty. I worked as a paramedic, and occasionally as a studio musician.”

“You were in a band?” Cole asked.

“Yeah, a few, when I was younger. Later on I just helped out when other people needed stuff recorded. Guitar mostly. It was fun work. I did most of it in the Bay Area. A little in LA.”

“You can shred on guitar?” Dalton asked, impressed.

“If shredding is required,” Joe said. “That hasn’t been the handiest skill here. Knowing some first aid helps at times.”

“Like with Sultan,” Cole said.

Joe winced. “I wish I could have handled that better. I’d never worked on an arrow wound.”

“I wasn’t criticizing,” Cole said. “At least you did something.”

“Have you guys been where he’s from?” Jace asked.

“Monterey?” Dalton clarified. “I haven’t.”

“Me neither,” Cole said. “Don’t they have an aquarium?”

“A famous one,” Joe said. “And a lot of natural beauty. Great coastline. Nice bay.”

“How’d you end up here?” Jace asked.

Joe clapped his hands together. “It’s a painful story. But it’s part of what I need to tell you. Let’s see . . . I was engaged to be married. Gwen Saunders, the love of my life. Our wedding was coming up. We were about ready to send out invitations. Her family had some money, so it was going to be at a fancy country club. Some of my friends were lined up to provide live music. It would have been awesome.”

“What happened?” Cole asked.

“I was walking by the ocean one evening,” Joe said. “I was lost in thought. Feeling grateful, mostly. Gwen is amazing. It’s ridiculous. She’s so smart. A lawyer. The kind you don’t want working against you. She’s beautiful. We both love music. Especially some of the oldies. Anyhow, the air in front of me

opened up, and before I knew what was happening, I got sucked through to here.”

“The air opened up?” Cole asked.

“It was a Wayminder,” Joe said. “I wasn’t part of her plan, apparently. Just a mishap. She wanted to cross over to the Outside, and I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Did you ask her to send you back?” Dalton asked.

“You bet,” Joe said. “And she told me the same thing you guys have heard. Once we cross to the Outskirts, we can return home temporarily, but we can’t stay there. And those who know us best forget us the most.”

“Gwen?” Mira asked.

“Bingo,” Joe said. “I ended up in Zeropolis, and my fiancée forgot she ever knew me.”

“You’re sure she forgot?” Cole asked.

Joe scrunched his nose. “I’m sure. There’s more to the story.”

“How did a Wayminder bring you to Zeropolis?” Dalton asked. “I thought their shaping worked in Creon.”

“Or Junction,” Cole said. “Like when we came through.”

“Their shaping messes with time and space,” Joe said. “The time manipulation only works in Creon. They open ways by tweaking space. That works best in Creon, but it can be done all over. A Wayminder could explain it better, but I think they can borrow space from Creon wherever they go.”

“That’s right,” Mira confirmed.

“The Wayminder felt bad,” Joe said. “She tried to make it right.”

“She was a girl?” Jace asked.

Joe nodded. “Sallanah. When I came through the way she opened, I broke her concentration and the way closed. She couldn’t open a new one right there, so we moved. She sent me back as soon as she could—within four hours of me crossing over. She got me close to where I had departed from. I ran to my car, drove to Gwen’s place. She answered the door . . . and looked at me like a total stranger.”

Cole’s insides twisted. He imagined getting a look like that from his mom. Or his dad. Or his sister. Is that what the future held? He glanced at Dalton. Based on his friend’s expression, the same worries were attacking him.

“Sallanah had warned me what to expect,” Joe said. “Since I’d only been in the Outskirts a short time, I kind of hoped the side effects wouldn’t take

hold. I said Gwen's name, and she asked if she knew me. I told her my name but got a blank stare. It was right out of a nightmare. The more I tried to talk, the more I hinted at details I knew about her, the more uncomfortable she became. Before things got out of hand, I walked away."

"Did you get sucked back here?" Dalton asked.

"In less than two hours," Joe said. "After Gwen, I went to visit a good friend who also had no memory of me. I called in to work. Nobody knew me. I found a place to park my car and just sat there, trying to think. I felt like I was losing my mind. For a good while I couldn't stop laughing. Not healthy laughter. Before too long, the air over the passenger seat started to ripple. A way opened up and I was back in Zeropolis."

"That's the worst," Cole said.

"Not yet," Joe said. "The worst is coming. Sit tight. Sallanah came and found me not long after I returned to Zeropolis. She apologized again, and explained that I was stuck in the Outskirts. She helped me get a freemark, an identity card, and a place to stay. She gave me some money. I was in a daze at the time. I couldn't appreciate how lucky I was to have someone to orient me."

"Are you still friends?" Dalton asked.

"Not really," Joe said. "In theory, I guess. I wasn't overly nice to her. In spite of her help, she had kind of ruined my life. Looking back now, I can at least appreciate how she tried to make up for it. I don't think she's in Zeropolis anymore. My understanding is she returned to Creon."

"You got stuck here," Jace said. "Then what?"

"I found a hospital," Joe said. "Since I'm a paramedic, they became very interested when they learned I was from Outside. They hired me, and we taught each other some techniques. The medical care in Zeropolis is pretty good. Some of their technology surpasses what we have back home, though our medicines are more advanced."

"How'd you get involved with the Unseen?" Cole wondered.

"Gradually," Joe said. "I began to notice how controlling the government is here. I could never shake the hope of finding a way back to Monterey. You meet a lot of people as a paramedic. I kept my eyes and ears open. I started to hear about thruports that could connect to our Internet back home. When I met the right people, I started asking questions. Within a couple of years, I connected with some members of the Unseen who helped me get online."

“That’s so weird they can get our Internet,” Dalton said. “Are we even in the same universe?”

“It takes help from a Wayminder,” Joe said. “Under normal conditions, a Wayminder can only hold a way open for a limited time. But some can open tiny ways for a really long time. The Wayminder opens tiny ways near a wireless router in our world, a tinker makes gear to pick up the signal, and before you know it, they’re online. Some tinkers even own routers in our world and pay the access fees and everything.”

“Did you try to contact Gwen?” Mira asked.

“What do you think?” Joe replied. “Nonstop. She never opened a single e-mail from me. None of my friends or family did either. I went through some of my obscure contacts and tried them. Sometimes I’d hear back. We’d make idle chitchat. I never tried to tell anyone where I was. I knew how it would sound.”

“That must have been so frustrating,” Cole said as his hopes of e-mailing his family crumbled. This story was creating a dark, anxious pit in his stomach.

“Still gets worse,” Joe said. “See, I know the password for Gwen’s e-mail. She had mine, too. She never changed it. So even though I couldn’t contact her, I could peek at her life. I could see the e-mails I sent, sitting there unopened. She opened everything. Even half of the spam. But nothing from me.”

“Man,” Dalton said.

“Bummer, right?” Joe said. “I’d check up on her from time to time. Meanwhile, the more I learned about the Unseen, the more I believed in their cause, and the more involved I became. I began to understand how completely Abram Trench wants to control life in Zeropolis. And I came to realize the tyranny of the High King. If I was stuck here, I wanted to help this world become the best it can be. I mean, slavery? Are you kidding me? As a fringe benefit, the Unseen gave me access to thruports so I could keep peeking at my world.”

“Because thruports are illegal,” Dalton said.

“The Grand Shaper does all he can to shut them down,” Joe said. “But the Unseen are well organized here. I had good access.”

“How’d it get worse?” Jace asked.

Joe sighed. “About six months ago, I started to notice some of Gwen’s e-mails taking a turn for the worse. I can read her pretty well. I know how she

gets when she's frustrated. She's type A—works hard, plays hard, and takes things hard. She internalizes every little failure. I helped balance her out there. I helped her have fun. I helped her shake stuff off. We'd listen to music, or I'd play my guitar, or we'd get Italian, or we'd ride bikes along the coast. She was going into a downward spiral like I'd never seen. It wasn't clear in most of her e-mails—mainly the ones to her sister, and hints in the messages to her mom.”

“Did you feel bad spying on her?” Jace asked.

Joe rubbed his face. “Well, yeah. But it was my only form of contact. I couldn't resist. As time went on, I realized that she felt alone. Maybe it's the romantic in me, but I thought maybe even though she couldn't remember me, a part of her was grieving my absence.”

Suddenly Cole was fighting back tears. Were his parents like that? Could they feel something was wrong, even though they had forgotten him? Were they depressed without knowing why? Even if it caused them pain, Cole couldn't help hoping that some part of them deep down remembered him. He had to believe there was some hidden refuge of memory that might be wakened somehow.

“That must have been difficult,” Mira said tenderly.

Staring at the floor, Joe folded and unfolded his arms. “It wasn't a picnic. The longer I watched, the clearer her sadness became. I couldn't take seeing Gwen like that, unable to help her. It led to a crazy, stupid plan.”

“What?” Cole asked, fascinated.

“I decided to bring her here,” Joe said.

“Did you do it?” Dalton asked. “Did it make her remember you?”

“I'm getting there,” Joe said. “I checked with a Wayminder. Not Sallanah. She was long gone. He told me that bringing Gwen here wouldn't make her remember me. But Gwen fell in love with me once, right? I'd woo her again. I'd fix the emptiness I saw in her. And maybe fill the void inside of me.”

“But she'd be stuck here too,” Cole said.

Joe nodded, rubbing his hands together. “I thought that through. If you're not a slave, and you live quietly, keep your head down, it isn't so bad here. We could live fulfilling lives, especially if we had each other. What I had with Gwen was epic. Whether or not she could remember me, I knew we'd figure it out. I convinced myself that if given a choice, Gwen would want to be with me. So I hired the Wayminder. My plan was to kidnap my fiancée and bring her here.”

“How’d that work out?” Dalton asked.

Joe winced. “Could have gone better.”

“Tell us,” Cole urged, completely hooked.

Gazing down at the floor, Joe wiped a hand over his face. “I knew it was a risk. That she might see me as a villain. But I thought we could overcome that. She was still Gwen, right? And I’m still me.” He fell silent.

“It went badly?” Mira guessed.

“Imagine this. We open a way to the street in front of my fiancée’s apartment. Ex-fiancée? Anyhow, I knew she was bad at locking the back door, and sure enough, I hop the fence into her little yard and find it open. I creep across her kitchen in the dark and up the stairs. It’s all way too familiar. Almost like I never left. I’m going quietly. I know that to her I’ll seem like a burglar. By the light coming through her window from the street I can see her sleeping. She’s so pretty. Without the worst luck ever, she would have already been my wife. We would have been married for years.”

Joe folded his arms. “There I am, in her room. I just have to get her down the stairs and out front to the way. She’s no weakling, but neither am I. I was sure I could get her there.”

“But,” Cole inserted.

Joe grimaced. “But there she was, snug and safe in a city without slaves, a place where she was free to live however she chose. How could I take that from her? Take away her home. Her family. Her job. Her life. Without permission.”

“What a nightmare,” Mira said.

“I couldn’t do it,” Joe said. “I wasn’t just worried about her *thinking* I was a villain. I knew in that moment that if I took her, I would *be* a villain. However much I loved her, however much she once loved me, I had no right to drag her here. So I left. I came back through the way empty-handed.”

“She’s still there?” Cole asked.

“And I’m still here,” Joe said. He smirked. “The next time I tried to check up on her using a thruport, I got caught. City Patrol raided the place. The guys running the thruport got taken away. It was my first offence. I got probation. It’s what wrecked my true ID. The City Patrol is aware of me now. It makes me less safe to travel with.”

“You used your fake ID today without trouble?” Jace asked.

“Yeah, it went well,” Joe said. “We should be all right to take the



monorail tomorrow. How backward is a place where it would have been legal for me to kidnap Gwen and bring her here, but I'm not allowed to browse the Internet? I could have made Gwen my slave without any legal trouble."

"This is why you wanted to leave Zeropolis?" Mira asked.

Joe nodded. "I got depressed. Really low. I knew I'd never see Gwen again. I was on probation. I was done with Zeropolis. I needed to get away. I went to the Unseen and told them I wanted a mission as far from the city as possible. I'd done some good work for them. The right people trusted me. That was when they let me know about you, Mira, and sent me on a mission to warn you about the legionnaires coming for you."

"You went straight from that to this?" Mira said with concern.

Joe flashed a tight smile. "This was exactly what I needed. Something to lose myself in. I threw myself at the danger. Part of me didn't mind the idea of dying. But I keep surviving. And now fate has brought me back here."

"What are you going to do?" Cole asked.

Joe gave a grim chuckle. "I've been pondering that long and hard ever since I learned we'd be coming here to find Constance. I think I just keep helping you kids. Focus on the work. Do I still miss Gwen? Take a wild guess. I'll miss her until the day I die. I know Cole hangs on to hope that there might be a way to get home. I'm open to that, but I don't dare to hope for it yet. I don't think my heart could take another disappointment. But I won't tell you to give up. If you find a way, please take me with you."

Cole's throat felt thick with emotion. It was hard to feel hopeful after hearing Joe's experience. "Trillian told me that there might be ways to change how things work here. It kind of makes sense. Pretty much everything else can be shaped. I'm not giving up until we try every option. We'll bug the Grand Shaper of Creon. We'll find out more about shapecraft. We'll go back to Trillian if we have to. We'll figure something out."

"Man, you guys really hate it here," Jace said.

"It's not our home," Dalton said.

"No, but it's my home," Jace replied. "And I've lived most my life as a slave. So I get not loving it."

"I admire your optimism, Cole," Joe said. "I know you really mean to tackle the impossible. I'll help however I can."

"First thing *I'm* going to try is getting some sleep," Jace said. "Those days as a wolf are catching up with me."

“We’re all tired,” Joe agreed. “Sorry for the long story.”

“Don’t apologize,” Mira said. “It was brave and generous of you to share it. We’ll do our best to help you.”

“Sorry about Gwen,” Cole said. “That’s really rough.”

“No worse than what you boys are going through,” Joe said. “You were ripped away from your families. I can only imagine what that feels like at your age.”

Cole didn’t trust his voice. Dalton wiped at his eyes. Cole tried to ignore the pitying looks from Mira and even Jace.

“Thanks for telling us what we’re up against,” Cole managed.

“It doesn’t paint a pretty picture of our chances to return to our normal lives,” Joe said. “But you deserve to know.”

“We always knew it would be hard,” Cole said. “I sometimes suspected they were bluffing about people forgetting us. I wondered whether we’d really get pulled back here if we made it home. I wanted it to be propaganda. A trick to keep us here. That hope made your story kind of disappointing, but it’s good to know the truth. We just have to find a way to change how it all works. Somehow we’ll do it.”

“We start by surviving tomorrow,” Joe said. “Let’s get some sleep while we can.”

## CHAPTER

# 6

## MONORAIL

The monorail station was a spacious, modern structure of steel and crystal. After walking through the front doors, Cole almost felt like he was back in Arizona at some public building—tile floors, powered lights, service counters, people waiting in line. It could have been the lobby of an airport.

“IDs first,” Joe said, leading the way.

Cole was now dressed in jeans and a brown shirt. The others all wore new clothes too. Joe wanted them to look like true Zeropolites.

They got in a fairly short line at a counter marked IDENTIFICATION. Joe had explained that the city government used the monorail stations to provide services for the outposts. More than just transportation and shipping, the stations provided banking, processed identifications, registered vehicles and property, recorded complaints, and housed a modest garrison of patrolmen.

When their turn came, Joe and the kids approached the counter together. Joe handed his ID card to the older woman on duty. She looked at it, held it under a bluish light, then scanned it into a machine. Staring down at her screen, she looked perplexed for a moment, glancing quickly at Joe.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

Cole’s gut clenched, but he tried to look calm.

The woman gave a small smile. “Your mustache in the photo threw me off.”

“I miss it sometimes,” Joe said, rubbing his upper lip.

“You look better without it,” she whispered loudly. “How can I help you today, Mr. Boone?”

“I’m traveling with my two nephews, my niece, and their slave. They’re all first-timers in Zeropolis, so they’ll need IDs.”

“Okay,” she said, fingers rattling on a keyboard. “Do they have any identifying paperwork from Elloweer?”

Joe shook his head. “I’m sure you know how badly organized they are in Elloweer when it comes to records.”

“All too well,” she said. “I deal with the sloppy results every day. Do you have papers for the slave?”

“He’s marked, of course,” Joe said. “But we don’t have papers.”

The woman behind the counter looked at Dalton. “Are these your owners?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“Very well,” the woman said. “There’s a two-hundred-credit processing fee for minors, and a six-hundred-credit fee for slaves.”

“Use my card,” Joe said.

“The fees double without papers,” she said.

“I understand,” Joe replied.

The woman held his card under a scanner. “Okay.” She smiled at the kids, her gaze taking them in. “Have you ever been to the city?”

“No,” Mira said.

“Are you sure you want to go there?” she asked playfully.

“Yes,” Cole said.

“Very well,” the woman said. “I need to take individual pictures, then I’ll need your names along with the correct spellings.”

She gestured for Cole to come around the counter, so he did. He stood on a mark, stared at a lens, and smiled. It didn’t feel too different from school photos.

“Name?” she asked.

“Bubba Boone,” Cole said. “B-U-B-B-A.”

As Cole watched, Mira went on record as Shannon Boone, Jace became Hampton Boone, and Dalton became Kevin son of Mark. Cole was the first kid to receive a dark green ID card. He hefted it, stroking the metallic surface with his thumb. “Why isn’t it blue like yours?” Cole asked Joe.

“You’re under sixteen,” Joe said.

Jace and Mira accepted their cards. Dalton got his last. It was bloodred.

“Slave color?” he asked, holding it up to the lady behind the counter.

She gave a curt nod, then looked beyond him. “Next.”

Joe herded Cole and the others over to a nearby wall. “Wait here while I buy tickets,” he instructed.

As soon as he walked off, Jace turned to Dalton. “I’m thirsty, slave boy,” he said. “Fetch me a drink.”

Dalton scowled.

“Don’t make a scene, Kevin,” Jace warned. “We all have to do our part.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Dalton said.

“I’m not royalty,” Jace explained. “Master will do.”

“Knock it off,” Cole said. “It isn’t his fault he wasn’t around when Declan changed our bondmarks to freemarks.”

“Wasn’t my fault I had a bondmark to begin with,” Jace countered. “If our slave just stands around all the time and never serves us, how realistic does that look? It’s safer for him and for us if he plays the part.”

Cole could tell Jace enjoyed bossing Dalton around, and he was probably getting in some retaliation for the hidden saddle, but it was hard to argue against his point. They wanted to blend in.

“It’s okay,” Dalton said. “Do you want a drink, Mira? Cole?”

“Sure,” Mira said. “Thanks.”

“Won’t that be a lot to carry?” Cole asked.

“I’ll manage,” Dalton said.

“Don’t forget to hold any doors open for us,” Jace said. “Be the first to stand, the last to sit. Treat us like masters. Work to keep us comfortable. Anticipate our needs. And try not to jump into any conversations free people are having.”

“Aren’t you getting carried away?” Cole said.

“I was a slave for a long time,” Jace said. “Believe me, I know how they’re supposed to behave.”

“Thanks, master,” Dalton said with some sarcasm. He walked away.

“How is he supposed to find drinks?” Cole wondered. “He doesn’t have any money.”

“A good slave would figure it out,” Jace said.

“I understand playing our roles,” Mira said. “But, Jace, you don’t have to enjoy it so much.”

Jace chuckled and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I'm just grateful to be free."

"I'd think that would include some empathy for those still stuck as slaves," Mira said.

"We're just pretending he's our slave," Jace reminded her.

"But we're not pretending he's a slave," Cole said. "He's been a slave since he got here. His bondmark is real."

"Sometimes you two are unbelievably boring," Jace said, turning his back on them and shuffling a few steps away.

A few minutes later, Joe returned with Dalton behind him. Joe held a can of soda. Dalton carried four others. He handed one to Cole, another to Mira, and a third to Jace.

Cole inspected the orange can. The word "POW!" slanted across it in thick yellow letters. It had a pull tab just like the soda cans back home. Cole popped the top and took a sip. The bubbly liquid fizzed in his mouth and down his throat. It tasted sweet, the orange flavoring enhanced by a hint of vanilla.

"That's not bad," Cole said, licking his lips. "I haven't had a soda since I came here."

Jace squinted at the top of the can, first pressing the tab down, then picking at it. Mira held her soda unopened as well.

"Having trouble, master?" Dalton asked.

"I'm waiting for you to do your job," Jace said.

Dalton held out a hand, accepted the can, and demonstrated how to use the tab to pop it open. He handed it back to Jace. After seeing the example, Mira popped her own can open. Dalton opened his as well.

"We have tickets?" Cole asked, taking another sip.

"We're officially going to town," Joe said. "The monorail leaves in about fifteen minutes. We should get aboard."

"Will our swords be a problem?" Jace asked.

Joe held up his travel bag. "Both are in here. Primitive weapons like swords should be okay. They don't really screen for weapons here. Not like on flights back home."

Joe led them to a line waiting to pass through a door in a high crystal wall. A pair of patrolmen flanked the door, one checking IDs and tickets, the other watching the line. They wore gray-and-black uniforms with padding over the

chest and on their limbs. Dangling from their shoulders by a strap, each man had a tubular weapon that looked like a miniature rocket launcher.

The line moved steadily. Cole shuffled forward beside Joe.

“What are those weapons?” Cole murmured. “Little bazookas?”

“No,” Joe said softly. “Those are trapguns. Most of the weapons used by patrolmen stun or entrap. You’ll get gummed up by quicktar, or stuck to webby nets. Nonlethal, but very effective. There isn’t usually much violence in Zeropolis. Crime happens quietly here.”

Joe stopped talking as they drew near to the door. Cole clutched his ticket and his ID card. He thought about how he would hand over the ticket and ID card if he wasn’t a wanted fugitive. He decided to act calm and polite, maybe a little distracted.

Joe held out his card. The patrolman scanned it with a device, glanced at his ticket, then waved him along.

Upon reaching the patrolman, Cole fretted about making too much eye contact. Or too little. The patrolman took Cole’s card and scanned it, then waved him through. Cole didn’t look back to watch the other kids, but soon they were all together beyond the crystal wall.

Up ahead, three elevators shuttled people up to the level of the track. Elaborate compartments of crystal and bronze, the elevators were not hidden within a shaft. Each had an operator and could fit roughly ten passengers.

“They look kind of old-fashioned,” Dalton observed, beside Cole.

“They’re fast though,” Cole replied. He noticed Jace watching the elevators climb and sink. He looked both excited and a little uncertain. “Ever ridden in an elevator, Jace?”

“Nope,” Jace said.

“Me neither,” Mira added.

“They call them senders here,” Joe mentioned. “Like ‘ascend’ and ‘descend.’”

After a short wait, Cole and his four companions entered a sender with a few other people. The operator raised a lever, and the compartment surged briskly upward.

When Cole exited the sender, the monorail came into full view. Long and sleek, the streamlined train was composed of silvery metal and crystal tinted such a dark blue that Cole could only barely see the forms moving inside.

“Bonded crystal?” Cole asked.

“Very good,” Joe said. “They use it a lot here. Those elevators were made of bonded crystal and some sturdy alloy. Maybe renium. The crystal for the monorail is grade two, tougher than steel. The train moves fast—over three hundred miles per hour.”

Cole and the others joined the crowd making for one of the many doors of the long train. More patrolmen stood on the platform, trapguns dangling within easy reach. A conductor at the door to the monorail quickly checked tickets as people entered. Cole boarded after Joe, flashing his ticket to the conductor, then following Joe down the central aisle of the train.

From inside the monorail, the tinted glass didn’t look nearly so dark, though everything outside had bluish tones. People were settling into the cushioned seats at either side of the aisle. Much as when he had walked into the station, Cole felt a sense of home. This monorail was too modern to fit his experiences in the Outskirts. It was too much like boarding the light rail in Phoenix or getting on a plane.

Joe led them down the aisle to the end of the car, through a set of doors, and along another aisle until the seats gave way to private compartments on either side, each with its own door. Checking his ticket, Joe opened the door of a compartment where two cushioned benches faced each other. The far wall was all window.

“Our own room?” Cole asked.

“We’re not poor,” Joe said. “I thought a little privacy would be nice.”

Joe and Dalton sat on one side, leaving Cole, Mira, and Jace on the other. With the door shut, they could almost be alone on the train—only the faintest noise of other passengers moving around or conversing reached them.

Looking out the window at the platform, Cole watched other passengers approaching the monorail. The crowd thinned until only a few patrolmen remained.

A soothing female voice came from a speaker in the ceiling. “Now departing Outpost 121. Next stop, Outpost 45. Please keep your tickets handy and enjoy the ride.”

The monorail began to slide forward, starting off so gently that it was difficult for Cole to determine when the motion began. Smoothly and steadily they picked up speed. They left the station behind, and the low buildings of the outpost blurred beneath them. Cole leaned his head against the window to enjoy the foreground streaming past.



The monorail reached terrific speed, but inside their compartment Cole could feel no motion. When he closed his eyes, they could have been standing still.

“Are we even moving?” Cole asked. “It’s almost like the outside scenery is fake!”

“The monorail is well designed,” Joe said. “It floats on a magnetic cushion and is extremely aerodynamic.”

“I’ve never imagined anything like this,” Jace asked. “I can’t believe the speed!”

“When do we get off?” Dalton wondered.

“Sixth stop from now,” Joe said. “Hanover Station. We’ll stop at two other outposts, then pass a few stations in the city.”

“How long?” Dalton asked.

“We have to go more than a thousand miles,” Joe said. “Including the stops, we should arrive in just over four hours.”

Cole gave a low whistle. That was fast!

“Do you know how to find the Unseen?” Mira asked.

“I’ve been gone for a while,” Joe said. “They change location a lot to stay ahead of the patrolmen. We’ll hit a gaming hub called Axis. Cole or Dalton would call it an arcade. Some of the CKs should be there. The Crystal Keepers. They’re a gang of gamers who help out the Unseen. They’ll know how to help us get in touch with the leadership.”

“Think we can find a thruport?” Cole asked.

“Probably, once we reach the Unseen,” Joe said. “We’ll get their help in finding Constance and ask about your slave friends.”

“And I’m going to find out about Headgear,” Jace said. “I want a hat like that robot guy had.”

Joe snapped his fingers. “Whoops, I meant to put some money on your ID cards. We’ll have to do that once we get to the city.”

Somebody tapped on the door. Joe opened it to reveal a conductor. “Tickets, please,” the man said.

They handed over their tickets. The man passed a handheld scanner over them, then returned them. “Thanks for riding the monorail,” he said, tipping his hat. Then he backed into the hall and closed the door.

Cole leaned back on his bench. It was comfortable, the cushions a nice blend of soft but firm. He hadn’t slept well the night before. He had been

excited to see the city, and he had kept thinking about his parents not missing him.

Cole was in the corner by the window, so he leaned his head against the glass. In that position, he could feel the slightest hint of vibration against his skull. It was kind of soothing.

His thoughts turned to Jenna. Where was she now? Was she comfortable? Scared? Was she expecting a rescue? Was she trying to free herself? What if she had made a successful escape? Could she be on the run too?

Hopefully there would be answers in a few hours after he reached the city and the Unseen. What if they traced her ID card and instantly found her? What if he would see her later today? Or tomorrow? The hope seemed too greedy, but he knew it was possible. She had to be somewhere.

Gazing far out the window toward the horizon, Cole lost the sense of their speed. But when he glanced down at the nearby prairie streaking by beneath them, his appreciation was reawakened.

Feeling drowsy, Cole experimented with shutting his eyes. When he woke up, he found that the monorail was inside a station. Jerking away from the window, Cole saw the others eating sandwiches.

“I wondered when you’d join us,” Dalton said around a mouthful. “This is the first stop in the city.”

“We got you food,” Mira said, handing Cole a wrapped sandwich.

“How much longer?” Cole asked.

“The monorail doesn’t go as fast inside the city,” Joe said. “About half an hour.”

Cole unwrapped his sandwich and started working on it. The bread was a little stale, and the cuts of chicken inside it a little dry, but the tangy sauce was good, and he was hungry.

As the monorail slid out of the station, Cole watched eagerly out the window for his first view of the city. What he saw delighted him.

He had expected nonstop buildings. And yes, there were some serious clusters of skyscrapers spaced about, tall and elegant, mostly made of metal and crystal. But there were also open areas. Big parks and lakes. Neighborhoods with yards. Mansions with grounds. Huge, low buildings topped with gardens.

Even from the vantage of the elevated track, the city stretched as far as he could see, which led Cole to suppose it might continue well beyond what lay before him. Vehicles zoomed along the dark roads crisscrossing the city. Were

they cars? He couldn't see tires. Were they hovering? They all shared a similar design, though the colors varied. It was hard to discern all the details from up high, moving quickly.

“Next stop, Canal Station,” announced the soothing female voice from the speaker in the ceiling. “Please remain in your seats when we stop while the City Patrol arrests a suspect. The all clear will be announced once the suspect is in custody. Walt Boone, please submit quietly.”

## CHAPTER

# 7

## WELCOMING COMMITTEE

Joe immediately tried the door to the compartment. It was locked. He jiggled the handle roughly, but it only moved a little, and the door had no give.

The compartment was silent as Joe slid back into his seat. He looked ill, his face oddly blank. “Okay,” he said softly. “Okay. Okay.”

Cole banged the side of his fist against the window. It made no sound. The vault door at a bank might have shown a similar indifference to a punch.

“We’re not getting out through the window,” Cole said, hoping to jumpstart Joe.

“No,” Joe agreed. “It would take serious tools.” His eyes darted, but Cole wasn’t sure he was seeing much. “They must have flagged my ID after all, but let me board. That kind of patience isn’t how City Patrol normally works. I should have gone with my gut. The woman at the ID counter seemed a little flustered at first. We’ve made one stop in the city so far. I bet a bunch of patrolmen got on. Now they’re taking me off.”

“What can we do?” Mira asked.

Joe clutched the sides of his head. “A private compartment was a terrible idea. We’re stuck here until they come for us.”

The monorail began to slow.

“I should have spaced us throughout the train,” Joe lamented. “We should have sat near exits.”

“Would have, could have, should have,” Jace said impatiently. “What do we do?”

Out the window, the view of the city was replaced by the inside of a building. Signs on the wall declared it CANAL STATION. People milled on the platform. The monorail slowed even more.

Cole's mind raced. What could they do? They had no time! They were trapped!

"We let the welcoming committee take us," Joe said hurriedly. "They'll be ready for trouble. It's the wrong time to resist. I'll comply. They'll focus on me. Come quietly, but move slowly. Stray as far from me as you can. After we're off the monorail, I'll make a run for it. Scatter. Don't stay together. Don't use your ID cards. They're all tied to me now. Jace, keep my travel bag, if you can. All of you make your way to Axis. Leaf Street, near Hanover Station. Across from Zenith Park. Crystal Keepers."

The monorail had eased to a stop. The compartment door opened. Two heavily built patrolmen filled the doorway.

"What's the problem?" Joe asked politely.

"Joe MacFarland, you're under arrest," one of the patrolmen said.

"May I ask the charges?" Joe asked.

The patrolman grunted. "Not now. Come with us."

"I'm not sure what I've done wrong, but I'm all yours," Joe said.

"The false ID is a start," the patrolman said, glancing around the compartment. "Who are the kids?"

"Relatives of a friend," Joe said.

"You're the only adult present?" the patrolman asked.

"That's right," Joe said.

"We'll have to bring all of you to HQ," the patrolman said. "Step out into the hall. Joe first." He backed away from the doorway, allowing room to exit.

After a quick glance at Cole and the others, Joe rose and passed into the hall. The patrolman who had been speaking leaned back into the compartment, all business. "You kids stay with us."

"Why do we have to come?" Jace complained.

"Let's cut the chitchat," the patrolman said. "You're with a wanted criminal. Hurry up."

The patrolman backed out the door. Cole waited while Jace grabbed the travel bag and exited, then watched Mira and Dalton exit as well. What would it mean to go to HQ? It would get ugly fast if anybody figured out Mira's identity. What if the Hunter caught wind of it?

Cole took his time leaving the compartment. They had to try to get away. Maybe by going slow, he could create some space for himself.

Out in the central aisle, Joe stood with his wrists bound in front of him and a patrolman on either side. With his wrists tied and so many patrolmen around, would he even get the chance to run and make a diversion?

Once Cole exited the compartment, the lead patrolman gave a nod, and the procession started down the aisle toward the exit. Cole only had one patrolman behind him, so he tried to dawdle, crouching to tie his shoe, but the patrolman stayed with him.

As he advanced up the aisle toward the exit, Cole wished for his power back. If he could energize the Jumping Swords and Jace's golden rope, the odds of escape would immediately improve. But searching desperately inside, Cole perceived no trace of his power.

Accompanied by patrolmen, Joe stepped off the monorail. Other patrolmen followed.

The soothing female voice spoke again over the loudspeakers. "You may now exit the train for Canal Station. Thank you for your cooperation."

Passengers began to rise from their seats and move into the aisle, forcing the patrolman ahead of Cole to pause. Cole flattened himself against the seats at one side of the aisle to allow an older woman to pass. He stayed there, hoping the patrolman behind him might pass him as well, but the patrolman nudged him to continue.

Cole stepped down from the train onto a bustling platform. Some people were boarding the train, others getting off. Looking compliant, Joe stood some distance away with four patrolmen. Jace, Mira, and Dalton were moving in Joe's general direction, while also doing a decent job of spreading out.

Joe briefly met eyes with Cole. Then he bolted, racing down the platform toward the front of the monorail. All of the patrolmen reacted. Most reached for their trapguns, then seemed to think twice about using them on the crowded platform.

Though caught flat-footed, the patrolmen who had stood with Joe took off in pursuit, weapons in hand. Joe turned and raised his bound hands. In them he held a silver tube that Cole remembered from Skyport. Joe had pointed it at the legionnaires when he joined the fight to help Mira escape. Nothing had happened.

This time it worked.

A narrow jet of white material fountained from the end of the tube, staying in a focused stream until it hit the patrolman nearest to Joe and expanded into a dense cloud of foam. The foam only sprayed for a few seconds, but Joe managed to heavily cover two patrolmen and lightly got a third.

The rich lather made Cole think of shaving cream, but as the men coated by the substance slowed down, it became clear that the foam was rapidly hardening. One patrolman tipped over, trapped in a pillowy cocoon, his arms encased in front of his chest, his legs stuck together above the knees. The foamy husk helped break his fall. Another patrolman froze up while wiping the lather off his face. Only his upper body was covered, but he ended up with one hand stuck over his eye, and the other against his neck. A third patrolman had his hand bound to his weapon and his elbow to his side by a large, creamy glob.

Joe kept running, brushing by others in the crowd. As people saw him coming and made room for him, he swerved toward them rather than accepting the open space. Cole realized that Joe was using the crowd to deny the patrolmen a clear shot.

Cole also abruptly realized that he was unsupervised.

People were still going in and out of the monorail through the door he had just exited. The patrolman who had accompanied him was running after Joe, just like all the others. Taking his ticket from his pocket, Cole turned and boarded the train.

No conductor monitored the door. After stepping aboard with his head down, Cole turned away from the private compartments where he had ridden with his friends. He didn't want to walk by the same people who had watched the patrolmen march him off the monorail.

Moving down the aisle, Cole raised his head and tried to appear casual. Anxiety boiled inside of him. He expected a patrolman to call out to him at any moment. He walked through two cars before choosing an empty seat in a vacant row with a view of the platform. He wasn't sure if the seat required a certain ticket, but he figured he could act really polite and move if somebody called him on it.

Peering out the window, Cole found it mostly looked like business as usual on the platform, though a few people had paused to stare toward the front of the monorail, necks craning, presumably watching the chase. Joe had been sprinting while Cole walked, so unless he got caught right after Cole stopped

watching, he was probably a good distance down the platform. Cole couldn't see him from his seat and didn't want to make a show of looking.

Could Joe still be running? Did he have any chance of getting away? There had been a lot of patrolmen present, but if the crowd interfered enough, maybe it was possible. The distraction had sure worked. Cole hoped Dalton, Jace, and Mira had also taken advantage of the opportunity.

Cole silently willed the train to move forward. He didn't think any patrolmen had seen him return to the monorail, but he couldn't be sure. With the patrolmen chasing Joe, how much would they care that the kids who were with him had scattered? Would they bother to search the area?

The nearest exit door slid closed, and the monorail glided forward. The soothing woman came on over the loudspeaker. "Sorry for the delay. Next stop, Rockford Station."

As the monorail picked up speed, Cole watched out the window, hoping for a glimpse of Joe, trusting the tinting to hide his face from any patrolmen outside the train. Toward the end of the platform, Cole saw a group of patrolmen gathered around a pair of people pinned to the ground by a ropy mass of gray webbing. Due to the increasing speed of the monorail and the presence of the surrounding patrolmen, Cole only caught a quick glimpse of the people beneath the webs. But he knew one of them had to be Joe.

The train passed beyond the station, and once again Cole could see the sights of the city. But his gaze dropped to his lap. He felt guilty for escaping while Joe paid the price. He knew Joe wanted him to flee, but he still felt miserable. Why couldn't Joe have gotten away? What would the patrolmen do to him?

Cole stewed about his other friends. He assured himself they must have escaped. He couldn't be the only one who had made it. Joe had led the patrolmen on a good chase. He had made it a long way down the platform. Dalton, Jace, and Mira should be long gone.

From his current seat, Cole could see no patrolmen aboard the monorail. If he could make it past Rockford Station to the next stop, he could get off as planned and make his way to Axis. The others who got away would go there too. Then maybe they could contact the Unseen and figure out how to help Joe.

Or maybe none of the others had escaped. Maybe Mira would be discovered. Maybe he had seen the last of his friends.



Maybe he was alone.

## CHAPTER

# 8

## AXIS

**C**ole stepped off the monorail at Hanover Station, the fourth stop inside the city. The bustling station had a high ceiling and an enormous platform. Cole flowed with the crowd of disembarking passengers toward a wide stairway. Off to one side he saw senders as well.

It felt strange to be alone. He had traveled as part of a group for a long time. There had been others to rely on. When Joe was with him, he hadn't worried about navigation at all. Now he felt the true enormity of the city.

He was an outsider. He didn't know the places or the customs. He needed to fit in. He couldn't afford to draw attention. For the moment, that meant staying with the crowd.

Two patrolmen wandered the platform, trapguns dangling from straps over their shoulders. Cole avoided paying special attention to them, and they returned the favor.

As he reached the top of the stairs along with a funneling mass of other people, a hand clamped down on his shoulder from behind. "You're coming with me."

Cole jumped and turned, breaking the grip, and was ready to dash down the crowded stairs before he recognized Jace. "Not a great time for jokes," Cole said hotly.

"Seems like the perfect time," Jace replied. "It's the best I've felt all day."

They started walking down the stairs together. As angry as Cole felt at being startled, he was also relieved. At least somebody else had slipped away.

He wasn't completely on his own. Cole noticed Jace still carried the travel bag. "Good job keeping the bag."

Jace glanced over. "Did you expect me to leave it? My golden rope is always in my pocket, but I didn't want to lose the Jumping Swords and whatever else Joe stashed in this."

"How'd you get here?" Cole asked in a hushed voice.

"How do you think?" Jace replied. "On the monorail."

"Did you see what happened to the others?" Cole asked.

"A little," Jace said. "What do you know?"

"Not much," Cole said. "After Joe ran, I realized the patrol guys were distracted, so I hopped back on the train. As we pulled out of the station, I'm pretty sure I saw Joe glued to the ground by giant webs."

They reached the bottom of the stairs and walked out into a spacious lobby. The black tile floor darkly reflected the people walking on it.

"When Joe ran, I saw you get back on the monorail," Jace said. "Mira took off toward the nearest stairway. Dalton went diagonally to a different stairway. I headed along the platform in the opposite direction Joe had run. As I moved toward the back of the monorail, I decided you had a good idea, so I climbed aboard. The doors closed before long."

"Did you see what happened to the others?" Cole asked.

"Looked like they got away down the stairs," Jace said. "I was stupid. I should have found some other stairs and stayed with Mira to help her. I watched as best I could, and didn't see any patrolmen tailing them. They all went after Joe."

"Did you see him go down?" Cole asked.

"He was too far away and the station was too crowded," Jace said. "Since I went to the back of the train, I was farther from him than you were. When the monorail pulled out, I saw a couple of guys stuck to the floor. The way the patrolmen had gathered around them, it must have been Joe."

Cole and Jace exited the station through a pair of double doors. Outside, a wide sidewalk gave way to a glossy, black street composed of tightly fitted panels. Heavy traffic zipped up and down the street, the cars hovering roughly a foot above the ground. They were all rounded like Volkswagens, but a little longer and sleeker. The windows were tinted almost as much as the monorail's, keeping the drivers and passengers mostly hidden from view.

Watching the hover cars zoom along, Cole flinched as they swerved

aggressively, weaving in and out of close gaps. Time after time, right when a crash seemed inevitable, the vehicles corrected enough to avoid the collision. Cole had thought driving on the Arizona freeways looked intimidating, but that was nothing compared to this!

Along the edge of the street, at intervals, dark gray boxes sat atop metal poles. They looked kind of like parking meters, except nobody was parked. A woman approached a pole box and held up her ID card. A green light flared to life atop the box. Seconds later one of the hover vehicles glided to a stop near the woman. The door facing the sidewalk opened. Peering inside, Cole saw that the vehicle was vacant. No driver.

“Check it out,” Cole said, nodding toward the lady getting into the car. Without a driver, there was room for six passengers—three in the front, three in back.

“I am,” Jace replied.

The woman held up her ID card to a sensor inside the car. The door closed, and the vehicle darted away, deftly blending in with the rest of the traffic. As Cole and Jace continued to watch, more cars were summoned to pole boxes, while others stopped to drop off passengers. The hover vehicles accelerated briskly and braked abruptly, all without touching the ground or causing a wreck. They were almost totally silent except for the air whooshing around them.

“I think it’s completely automated,” Cole said.

“Fancy word,” Jace said.

“There aren’t any drivers,” Cole rephrased.

“I noticed,” Jace said. “How could that work?”

“It must be computers,” Cole said. “Machines. Like the robots we saw.”

They stood watching the frenetic parade of near misses. Even when an accident looked certain, it didn’t happen.

“This many cars should be causing a traffic jam,” Cole said. “It’s a cool system. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Me neither,” Jace said wholeheartedly. “Should we go?”

“I wish I had an ID card with credits on it,” Cole said. “I’d love to go for a ride.”

“You heard Joe, right?” Jace checked. “We need to ditch our IDs.”

“I heard him,” Cole said. “I was just wishing.”

“Might be smart to get moving,” Jace suggested. “Who knows if those

patrolmen are searching for us? We should get away from the station.”

The reminder helped snap Cole out of his fascinated trance. Just because they had made it a couple of stations away from where Joe got arrested didn't mean they were safe. There would be time to pay more attention to the amazing technology of Zeropolis later.

Tearing his gaze away from the interweaving parade of hover cars, Cole noticed the park on the far side of the road. Tall trees presided over neat hedgerows, wide walkways, lush lawns, and splashing fountains. Beyond the borders of the park, Cole could see a variety of buildings.

The street was much too busy to cross without making a scene. Cole wondered if the vehicles were programmed to avoid a person on the road, or if they'd just mow him down. He didn't want to be the guinea pig for that experiment.

Picking a random direction, Cole followed the sidewalk, Jace at his side. Before too long they came to a flight of stairs that gave access to a pedestrian tunnel under the road. “Should we cross?” Cole asked.

“Sure.”

They started down the steps. “Look,” Cole said, pointing at a sign. “Zenith Park. Joe said Axis is across the street from there.”

“Then it could be on this side of the street,” Jace said.

“What street did he say Axis is on?”

“Leaf?”

“Is this Leaf Street?”

“Do I seem like a local?” Jace complained.

Cole waved at a young guy coming up the stairs. “Excuse me. What street is this?”

“Grant,” the guy said.

“Which way is Leaf?” Cole asked politely.

“Far side of the park,” the guy said, not slowing.

Cole picked up his pace. “Thanks.”

He and Jace passed through the pedestrian tunnel, then climbed the stairs at the far side. They emerged into the park. The sun was getting low but wouldn't set for a couple more hours. Cole could smell the nearby lawn. Birds twittered in the trees. It was too pretty of a day to be on the run from patrolmen. Frisbee golf seemed more appropriate.

“This feels too much like home,” Cole said.

“You live in a park?” Jace asked.

“I mean everything. This city.”

“Your home is like this place?”

Cole studied the buildings beyond the perimeter of the park. Some were skyscrapers. Some were apartments. Some looked like banks or museums. There was a nice variety. It all felt modern.

“Where I’m from is way more like this than Sambria or Elloweer,” Cole said. “We have public parks and big cities. We have trains and even some monorails. We have tall buildings. We have cars, but people drive them.”

“You drove one of those?” Jace asked, pointing back at the road.

“I wasn’t old enough,” Cole said. “My dad drove. He let me steer a couple of times, but not on busy streets.”

They strolled toward a plaza with a multitiered fountain at the center. After spouting up in the middle, the water flowed from level to level in a series of broad cascades.

“Must be nice to feel at home,” Jace said.

“I don’t know,” Cole replied. “I’ve never been alone in a big city like this. That much is unfamiliar. Some of the technology is pretty different from what I know. And back home I was never a wanted fugitive.”

Jace took a deep, cleansing breath. “Cities are the place to be. You can find so much without going very far. Places to eat. Things to do. Sights to see. People to meet. And this is the biggest city in the Outskirts.”

“Which can also mean lots of bad guys,” Cole said. “Lots of people who want to find us. Lots of criminals. Lots of danger.”

“It can also mean lots of places to hide,” Jace said. “Crowds to blend with. Bargains to make. Allies to find. Don’t be such a wimp.”

“Sorry if I’m not doing cartwheels after the patrolmen took Joe,” Cole said. “Makes the city seem a little less safe. I’m sick of being chased.”

“Then you’re hanging with the wrong crowd,” Jace said. “Mira’s going to be chased until her dad is off the throne. And that day is a long way off.”

“Duh. I’m not new here. But so far, we’ve never been in a city long before we’re running for our lives.”

“It looked bad back there,” Jace admitted. “But we’re in the clear now. Be glad we got away. Joe pulled off a great diversion. I’m pretty sure Mira and Dalton escaped too. It’ll take them longer to get here without money. The

monorail took us a good distance from Canal Station. But sooner or later they'll turn up, then we'll figure out how to help Joe."

"I hope so," Cole said, though he didn't feel very optimistic. None of their powerful items worked here. How were they supposed to take on a huge police force like the patrolmen? Their only chance was if the Unseen could aid them.

With its name inscribed in flashing neon on the side of the building facing the park, Axis was not tricky to find. Cole and Jace took a pedestrian tunnel under Leaf Street and emerged near the front doors. Checking up and down the bustling road, Cole noticed trees lining both sides as far as he could see.

"Let me take the lead in here," Jace said.

"Why?" Cole replied. "Because you have so much experience with arcades?"

"We might have to look streetwise," Jace said.

"I wasn't a prince in my world," Cole said. "I know how to stand up for myself. And I've been to places like this."

Jace shrugged. "I like the confidence. Let's go."

Cole led the way through two sets of doors and into the sprawling arcade. The high, black ceiling almost made it seem as if the room extended up into a starless sky. Cole wondered how the room could look so dark when there were so many lights pulsating in a wide array of colors. The gaming hub wasn't too crowded, with only about half the games occupied and short lines for the more popular attractions.

Some aspects of how the games were arranged reminded Cole of his world, but there were also many differences. None of the games within view used a video screen. He saw elaborate pinball machines, complicated ring tosses, diverse shooting galleries, and many games where balls were rolled or thrown. A good number of the games were larger than any he had seen back home. Several required the participant to enter a spacious cube with clear walls.

"This place is unreal," Jace said with reverence.

Cole nodded. How would they know who belonged to the Crystal Keepers? Would it be written on their T-shirts? Who could they safely ask? "Do we just roam around?" Cole wondered.

"Yep," Jace said. "Keep your ears open. Watch for clues. We'll find who we're looking for."

They wandered over to a clear cube labeled KNOCKOUT!, where a kid

in a helmet and padded vest fought a heavily padded robot. Not much more than a cylinder with two long arms and a glowing face near the top, the robot was anchored to the ground and wielded a cushioned club in each hand.

As they watched, Cole realized the boy was trying to use his own padded weapon to strike five targets on the robot without getting hit. He used his club defensively to block blows, then lashed out at the targets when he had an opening. When he hit a target, it lit up.

After connecting with the third target, the robot sped up. The kid strained to block the more aggressive attacks but got whacked in the side of the head and then thumped on the chest.

The illuminated targets went dark, the lighting within the cube dimmed, and the robot laughed mechanically, raising both arms in victory. The boy went to the door and it opened up, freeing him from the cube. He handed his padded bat to the next player in line, who was already wearing a helmet and vest. The new player entered, displayed his ID card, and the door closed.

“Looks like you pay with your ID,” Cole said.

“Isn’t that how you pay for everything here?” Jace said. “Too bad our cards will probably alert patrolmen if we use them. Plus, we’re broke.”

“I still have a bunch of ringers,” Cole said.

“Me too. But even if we could change them to credits, we can’t risk using our cards.”

“Think you could take out the robot?” Cole asked.

Jace gave a small snort. “In a heartbeat.”

Cole couldn’t help thinking it was easy to brag since they didn’t have any way to try the game. The second kid didn’t last long, striking only one target before getting pummeled. Cole wondered how he would do against the robot. It was pretty quick.

Jace led the way to another game. A glitzy sign above the cube dubbed it PRIZE HUNTER. Inside the cube, a weaponless girl in a helmet and puffy vest crouched in a corner. In the center, a robotic cylinder with twenty padded arms twisted and flailed. An additional three dozen mechanical arms reached down from the ceiling. About half the arms held slender cushioned weapons. The other half clutched prizes ranging from candy bars to stuffed animals to electronics.

“What’s she doing?” Cole asked.

“Picking her moment,” Jace said. “Looks like the game can’t reach her



there.”

The multijointed arms raised and lowered, stretched and bent. Suddenly the girl raced out of the corner. After dodging a couple of arms, she reached for a bag of peanuts. Her fingers brushed the bag, but she failed to take hold of it. A padded arm struck her across the back. She went down, and the lighting in the cube dimmed. The arms stopped moving.

The girl got up and exited. Nobody was waiting for the next turn. Jace hustled over to the girl, who looked about their age.

“You wanted the nuts?” he asked.

“Kind of,” the girl said. “Stupid thing is rigged. It’s impossible to win.”

“You have to grab a prize before you get hit?” he asked.

“You can take as many hits as you want until you get knocked down,” the girl said.

“Want me to get you some nuts?” Jace asked, rubbing his hands together.

The girl paused. “If you want.”

“I don’t have any credits,” Jace said. “I’d need to borrow your ID.”

“Yeah, and then run off with it,” the girl said. “Get lost.” She walked hurriedly away.

A girl who must have been a couple of years older than them approached. She had a dark, stylish haircut with the tips dyed red and wore a mostly black outfit that hugged her trim physique. About the same height as Jace, she was a few inches taller than Cole. “You bothering her?” she asked.

“I was going to win her some prizes,” Jace said.

“Win some for me,” the girl replied.

“You have to cover my game,” Jace said.

The girl rolled her eyes. “You’ll win me prizes using my money? No wonder she took off! Are you guys posties?”

“Huh?” Cole asked.

“You know, from the outposts,” the girl said. “New to town. What are you trying to pull?”

Cole didn’t like her attitude. She seemed to think she was pretty awesome. “Maybe we’re con artists trying to seem oblivious.”

The girl folded her arms. “If so, you’re doing a perfect job.”

“Bet on me,” Jace invited. “I’m a good investment. But I keep every third prize.”

“If you win them at once,” the girl replied. “Otherwise I keep

everything.”

“Sure,” Jace said.

“Fine, I’m curious,” the girl said. “It’s ten credits per game. You get one try.”

“Where do I snag a helmet?” Jace asked.

The girl groaned. “You really are from the posts!”

“Maybe,” Jace replied. “But I’m here now.”

She walked them over to a bin with helmets and padded vests and helped Jace choose some. They returned to the Prize Hunter game to find the cube still empty.

The girl held out her ID. “I need your card as collateral.”

Jace handed it over. The girl glanced at it. “You just got this today.”

“Maybe,” Jace said, glancing at her card, “Luri.”

“You’re not posties,” Luri said. “You’re outlanders. Have you ever even been to a gaming hub?”

Cole tried to read her. She was acting casual but seemed extra curious. Could she be a Crystal Keeper? Or might she be dangerous? Did City Patrol have informants in places like this? She was pretty young. Maybe she was just nosy.

“You’ll get prizes,” Jace said evenly.

“Go for it,” she said, waving him away. “If any part of you besides your feet touches the ground, you’re through.”

“Did you read the sign?” Cole asked, pointing at a little placard beside the door into the cube.

THIS GAME MAY CAUSE BODILY HARM. PLAY AT YOUR OWN RISK.

“Isn’t that obvious?” Jace asked.

“I guess,” Cole said.

“All the good ones have warnings,” Luri said.

Jace entered the cube and held Luri’s ID card toward the door. The lighting in the cube brightened, and the arms started moving. Divided into several segments, different levels of the robotic cylinder pivoted independently. As some of the attack arms came his way wielding padded weapons, Jace ran diagonally and reached for the bag of nuts. The arm holding the treats raised them out of reach, and an arm with a padded bat struck Jace on the shoulder. He stumbled into a second club that whacked him in the chest and should have knocked him down, but Jace grabbed hold of it just

long enough to regain his balance. After releasing the club, he darted forward and snatched a candy bar from a mechanical hand.

“Not pretty,” Luri said. “But he kept his feet.”

An instant after he claimed the candy, a padded bat whacked Jace in the back of the head. He staggered but ducked another swing, then jumped a swift swipe at his shins. Lunging, he ripped a stuffed rabbit from a robotic grasp, then spun away from a blow to his side, barely staying on his feet.

“He should just go down,” Luri said.

Cole thought the arms sped up a little. Jace tossed aside the stuffed animal and the candy bar. He dodged and weaved, reaching for prizes and barely missing them. He got battered by three padded weapons in a row and hung on to the third to keep from falling. It lifted him off his feet as two more cushioned bats swung at him. Jace dropped and crouched low just in time, holding his hands out for balance but keeping them off the ground.

“He’s going to get hurt,” Luri said.

Jace waded in toward the cylinder where the arms were thickest. He danced and twisted to turn some attacks from the arms into glancing blows and snagged a small, golden disk covered in shrink-wrap. Cole wondered if it might be a little CD or DVD.

As he stood near the cylinder, a bat hit Jace on the shoulder while another swept his legs from the other direction. He flopped to the floor, and the lights dimmed. Getting up, the little golden disk still in hand, Jace collected the candy bar and the stuffed rabbit from the floor, then exited.

“Looked like human pinball,” Luri said. “I get two of the prizes.”

“What’s this?” Jace asked, displaying the little golden disk.

“A prize file,” Luri said. “You put it in a collector. You’re never sure about the prize until you turn it in. A lot of the time they have credits you can load onto your card. Usually twenty or so but sometimes more.”

“Take it,” Jace said. He held up the other two prizes. “You want the candy bar or the rabbit?”

Luri took the rabbit. “It has more personality than a Zowie bar,” she said. “You didn’t do badly for an outlander, but you’re going to get hurt if you keep playing like that.”

“I already got hurt,” Jace said, rubbing his shoulder.

“Looked kind of painful,” Cole said with a wince.

Jace shrugged it off. “I’ve been in real fights. These are just games.”

“Real fights, huh?” Luri said. “What’s your story?”

“We were hoping to win a bunny,” Cole said. “Now that dream is shattered.”

She shook her head. “You clearly don’t fit in here.”

Cole felt another flash of worry—she was definitely studying them. What was she up to? Was she a potential ally or just one more person out to get them? Or was he being paranoid? She could just be a bored gamer who liked to meet people. In that case, she might be a good person to ask about the Crystal Keepers.

“What makes you say that?” Jace asked.

“You wandered in here too wide-eyed. You begged for credits to play, then you didn’t put up a fight to keep the prize file. We never agreed that you had to take the worst of the three prizes, but you volunteered. And your clothes aren’t quite right.”

“It’s because I don’t have my hat yet,” Jace muttered to Cole.

“Also, I’ve never seen you in here before, or around this part of town,” Luri added.

“You know everyone who comes in here?” Cole challenged. Did that mean she was one of the good guys? The Crystal Keepers had been described as gamers. But if he was wrong, Cole knew he and Jace could end up getting arrested. At times like this he really missed his life before the Outskirts, when not everyone he met was a potential enemy.

“More or less,” Luri said.

“Anyone who can spend that much time here must be rich,” Jace said.

“I’m not born to it,” the girl replied. “You can stretch your credits if you’re good.”

“I guess you could show us how it’s done,” Cole said, glancing toward Prize Hunter.

“Good guess,” she said. She swatted Jace on the chest with the back of her hand. “You did all right for a clueless rookie. You’re scrappy. Seriously, why are you guys here?”

“At Axis?” Jace asked.

“And in the city,” she said.

Jace and Cole shared a look.

“Are you really good at that game?” Jace asked, indicating Prize Hunter.

“All the games,” the girl answered.

“Why don’t you show us?” Jace asked.

“Because I don’t care if you believe me,” the girl said. “Why are you guys here?”

“To play games,” Jace said.

“But you didn’t bring any credits,” she pointed out.

“Makes it more interesting,” Cole said.

“Makes it weird,” the girl said. “You’re outlanders; you’re clueless; you’re creditless. . . . Why come here?”

“Why do you care?” Jace asked.

“I pay attention to who comes and goes,” she said. She patted Cole on the chest. “You want to win me something now?”

“Maybe,” he said.

“Want to try Knockout!? You were checking it out earlier. I’ll pay.”

“Why?” Cole asked.

“I want to see how you do,” she said. “Maybe I’ll get another prize disk.”

“You like watching us get beat up,” Cole said.

“That’s entertaining,” she admitted. “Knockout is less brutal than Prize Hunter. It requires more finesse. One hit and you’re done. You don’t have to fall. And you don’t have to try it.”

“Let’s go,” Cole replied.

## CHAPTER

# 9

## ROULETTE

“Any tips?” Cole asked as they got in line for Knockout! One kid waited ahead of them.

“Too many tips would spoil the experiment,” Luri said. “If you want to block an attack with your bat, you need to swing hard. The bot pushes through wimpy blocks. You probably noticed that it speeds up after you hit three targets.”

Jace gave Cole his helmet and vest. “Just one prize?” Cole asked.

Luri nodded. “You have to hit all five targets to get a prize file. And if I’m paying, I keep it.”

“What do I get?” Cole asked, adjusting the chin strap on his helmet.

“A free game,” Luri said.

Jace held out the candy bar he won to Cole. “Want to split it?”

“Sure,” Cole said, accepting the treat.

The word “ZOWIE” was printed across the foil wrapper.

Cole flipped it over and read the back:

Ingredients: Camels, microscopes, yams, hydrogen, coral reefs, mannequins, poems, comets, mousetraps, sarcasm, cacti, labyrinths; contains less than 2% uranium, cyanide, cobwebs, magma, polio

Chuckling, Cole read the ingredients aloud to Jace.

“I’ve never tried camel,” Jace said dryly.

“The hump is the best part,” Cole replied, tearing open the wrapper. Inside he found a bar made of puffed rice drenched in chocolate. Cole broke the bar and handed half to Jace.

Cole took a bite. The bar was crunchy and not very dense, but quite tasty. Jace tried a bite as well. “I don’t taste the yams.”

“Or the mousetraps,” Cole added.

“Have you two seriously never had a Zowie bar?” the girl asked.

“Are we that obvious?” Cole grumbled.

The kid ahead of them got hit by the robot’s padded club, and the lights in the cube dimmed. He had lasted a little while by hanging back and staying defensive but hadn’t struck a single target. Cole had noticed some opportunities the kid had missed.

Luri displayed her ID card. “I need yours as collateral.”

Cole traded cards with her.

“Bubba?” she asked.

“It’s a family name,” Cole said.

“Go get that prize,” Jace said. “Five targets.”

“Like taking candy from a robot,” Cole said, stepping into the cube. He held up Luri’s ID card, the door closed, and the cube brightened. The cylindrical robot assumed a fighting position, both club-wielding arms ready.

As a bystander, Cole had seen some openings he thought he could exploit. Now that he stood facing the robot, the opportunities seemed less obvious. Those padded arms were long and agile and quick. Cole swallowed. He had once killed a cyclops. He had fought plenty of enemies with his life on the line. He should relax and have fun with this. It wasn’t life or death. But Luri and Jace were watching.

He edged forward, the bat ready. He considered the five illuminated targets on the robot. The lower two might be harder to hit, which meant he should take them out early, before the robot sped up.

The robot swung at him. Cole raised his bat as if to block the club but ducked it instead, racing in close and bashing the other club aside before crouching to hit one of the lower targets.

Instead of standing his ground or backing away like the other players had, Cole raced past the robot, turning in time to slap aside the attacking clubs. The robot was really coming after him now. Minimus had given him some combat training when they were together, but Cole knew he was still no

master swordsman. When both clubs came at him from opposite sides, Cole dove forward, rolled, and struck another target. As he scrambled past the robot, before he could get back on his feet, a club hit him in the back and the lights dimmed.

The blow caused him no pain. Cole was just mad to lose. At least he got a couple of targets. He had a new appreciation for the kid who tagged three just after they arrived.

“No prize?” Luri cried as Cole exited.

“Sorry,” Cole said.

“It wasn’t a terrible first game,” Luri said. “You had some good ideas. It’s hard to recover if you go to the ground.”

“I’ll try it,” Jace offered.

Lira smirked. “You can’t win this one through a willingness to take a beating.”

“Maybe you should show us how it’s done,” Jace suggested.

Luri shrugged. “I’ll show you one way.” She accepted her ID card from Cole and returned his, then claimed his helmet and vest.

“Think she’ll be good?” Jace asked as the door closed and the cube brightened.

“She talks like it,” Cole replied. “I guess we’ll see.”

Luri stalked confidently toward the cylindrical robot with the bat at her side. She only raised it to deflect attacks. Her stride never sped up or slowed down. When she was close enough, without moving her feet much, she alternately hammered targets and smashed attacks away. Her padded bat swished through the air quickly and accurately: target-block-block-target-block-block-block-block-target-block-target-target.

Cole stared in astonishment. Her last three attacks were particularly quick, denying the robot any time to speed up. After she struck the last target, the robot went slack while lights pulsed and sparkled. Luri waited until a prize file emerged from the body of the robot. She retrieved it, then casually walked away.

“That was amazing,” Cole gushed. “You made it look easy.”

“Maybe it *is* easy,” she replied.

“Come on,” Jace said. “I’m sure practice helps.”

Luri gave a little shrug. “Probably. Still, a lot of people never get the hang of it. The owners prefer for me to play the toughest games on the hardest



settings. I could take advantage of them by winning the easier games nonstop, but then they'd ban me, so that isn't really winning. They don't mind if I beat a few easy ones now and then. It gives the other players hope."

"Are you the best player?" Cole asked.

"Nope," she said. "One of the best, maybe. The best is Trickster."

"What's the hardest game?" Jace asked.

"P'Tang," Luri said. "Want to check it out?"

"Sure," Cole said.

Luri led them across the floor, passing numerous shooting and fighting games. At large tables, players manipulated the positions of their tiny soldiers and traded taking shots at the opposing army. Others guided metal balls through three-dimensional mazes with what had to be magnetic controls. Against a side wall stretched a huge obstacle course where players risked falling into a foam pit.

"What post did you guys come from this morning?" Luri asked.

"Who cares?" Jace replied.

"I'm interested," she said. "Give me a number."

"We're trying to leave some trouble behind," Cole said, hoping the answer was vague enough that it wouldn't get them in danger but might strike a chord if she was connected to the Crystal Keepers.

"Trouble with . . . patrolmen?"

"Maybe," Jace said.

"I love that kind of trouble," Luri said cheerily. "Come on, spill. What are you guys really doing here?"

"We're just checking out the place," Jace said. "We don't want a lot of attention."

"Too late," she said. "You have mine. Go on. Talk."

Cole glanced at Jace, who looked uncertain. "What if you're spying for them?" Cole blurted.

She laughed derisively. "As if the City Patrol were smart enough to use kids! Give me a break."

"You don't like the patrolmen?" Cole asked.

She stopped walking. Her mood became serious. "What are you guys looking for? I can help you. Just tell me. Or tell me where you came from. Or what you're running from."

Cole took a deep breath and finally decided to go for it. "Have you heard

of the Crystal Keepers?”

“I knew it!” Luri said, her smile wide. “What’s his name?”

“Who?” Cole asked.

“The guy who got arrested,” she said. “His name.”

“What do you mean?” Jace asked innocently.

Luri shook her head. “It’s good to be careful, but it’s pointless right now. I just have to confirm this. I know his name. What is it?”

“Joe,” Cole said.

“There we go,” she said gratefully. “Last name?”

“You give us the last name,” Cole insisted.

“I’ll give you half,” she said. “Mac . . .”

“ . . . Farland,” Cole completed.

“I take it his alias was somebody Boone?” Luri asked. “And you were posing as his relatives?”

“How do you know so much?” Jace asked.

“I’m not Luri,” she said. “Not any more than you’re Hampton or he’s Bubba. I go by Roulette.” She lowered her voice. “I’m one of the Crystal Keepers.”

Cole refrained from doing a happy dance.

“You’re a kid,” Jace said.

“And you’re about to get promoted to master detective,” she said, tapping him on the nose. “For the record, you’re both younger than me.”

Cole edged close to her and whispered, “Joe told us to come here and find the Crystal Keepers. We need to contact the Unseen.”

Roulette backed away and punched his shoulder lightly. “Don’t act so secretive. It draws attention.”

“I keep trying to tell him,” Jace said.

“Nobody cares what a couple of kids are saying at a gaming hub,” Roulette said. “Unless maybe they look suspicious. Where’s the girl?”

Trying not to look like he had a secret, Cole glanced at Jace.

“I’m on your side,” Roulette said. “I don’t know who she is. I don’t need to know. All I know is she matters. This came from the top, and it came fast. The patrolmen know some kids fled when Joe was taken, but they consider it a low priority. Our leaders feel otherwise. They care more about the girl than anything.”

“She’s not with us,” Jace said. “We scattered. I think she got away. She

knows to come here.”

“That’s good news,” Roulette said. “City Patrol hasn’t picked her up. Just Joe.”

“You’re sure?” Jace asked.

“We have sources.”

“Do you know Joe?” Cole asked.

“A little,” she said. “He’s from Outside. An accidental transplant to the Outskirts. Like you.”

“Me?” Cole asked innocently. After a moment, he wondered, “Do you think we can help Joe?”

Roulette scratched the back of her head. “They took him to City Patrol HQ. It would be tricky.”

“Where’s the rest of your crew?” Jace asked.

“Around,” she said. “Some of them, at least. Things have gotten complicated over the past several weeks.”

“Complicated how?” Jace wondered.

“Harder to operate,” Roulette said. “Some people got caught. A bunch more went deep into hiding. The Grand Shaper has been cracking down like never before.”

“Sorry to hear it,” Cole said.

“You didn’t approach us by accident,” Jace said. “You were watching for us.”

Roulette batted her eyes. “Be glad I was. You two were kind of standing out.”

“Is it dangerous here?” Cole asked.

“Less dangerous than most places,” Roulette said. “Nowhere is safe. This is mostly a hangout for kids. The City Patrol knows kids get up to mischief sometimes, but they don’t take us seriously. That’s good for the resistance. We can still move around freely.”

“Are all the Crystal Keepers kids?” Cole asked.

“That’s the idea,” Roulette said. “Maybe you can join. You’ve got potential. Depends what the higher-ups want. Let’s check out P’Tang.” She started walking.

“What about the girl?” Jace asked, staying beside her. “Should we go look for her?”

“Others are watching for her,” Roulette said. “Where’d you get off the

monorail?”

“Hanover Station,” Jace said. “She got out at Canal.”

“That’s kind of far,” Roulette said. “Does she have credits she can use?”

“No,” Jace said.

“But she knows to come here?” she checked.

“Right,” Jace said. “She knows the name of this place and the street.”

“She could take lots of routes,” Roulette said. “Your safest bet is to wait for her to show up here. If we go out looking, we’ll probably miss her. Is she competent?”

“Yes,” Jace said.

“She’ll show. Let’s play.”

“Why do you care so much about playing?” Cole asked.

“We’re at a gaming hub, genius,” Roulette said. “If you want to fit in, you play games. It’s a bonus of having an ID card you can use.”

Against the back wall of the gaming hub, beneath a brilliant P’TANG sign, a wall of crystal let onlookers see into a series of identical rooms. Except for the transparent wall, the floors, walls, and ceilings were covered in gray panels. A number of fist-size holes pocked the floor and ceiling, and larger holes of varied sizes gaped in the far wall, labeled with numbers from twenty to one hundred.

“Here’s an empty court,” Roulette said, approaching a room.

From a nearby bin, Roulette claimed elbow pads, knee pads, goggles, and a pair of paddles to go with her padded vest and helmet. The long, rectangular paddles matched the color of the gray panels in the room and looked like the perfect instruments to provide a memorable spanking. The handles made Cole think of tennis rackets.

“Two paddles?” Jace asked.

“I’m a lefty, so the left one is for offense,” she said. “The right is mostly for defense. But I sometimes score right-handed. In this game, you keep going until a ball hits you.”

Roulette entered the room and used her ID card to close the door. She went to the center of the court, clapped her paddles together, and light flashed from a nearby hole in the floor. A ball emerged and hovered at about shoulder height. It looked to be made of black rubber and was about the size of a racquetball. Slapping the ball with her paddle, she sent it through a medium-size hole in the rear wall and fifty points appeared on her scoreboard.

After three more flashes, three more balls were in play. For every ball Roulette hit into a hole, two or three emerged. The room started to get busy. Whenever she missed a hole, the ball ricocheted around. She moved quickly and competently, scoring often. As the flurry of balls increased, Roulette began to take fewer shots and defended herself more. She had to deal with each new ball coming at her, plus the random balls that had missed holes bouncing around. Occasionally a ball slipped through a hole by accident, increasing her score.

Before too long, a stray ball hit her leg, the lighting in the room dimmed, and all the balls in play fell to the floor, bouncing less than Cole would have expected. Her score read 1160. She left the room.

“Not my best score,” Roulette said. “Not enough for a prize. But it shows you how the game is played.”

“How do the balls float?” Cole asked.

“Sophisticated magnetics,” she said. “P’Tang has the best tech of any game here.”

“How do magnets work on rubber?” Cole asked.

“The balls have metal cores,” she said. “The real magic is inside the walls and floor and ceiling. Want to try?”

“It has to take lots of practice,” Cole hedged.

“Consider this your first practice,” Roulette said. “It’s great for hand-eye coordination, reflex conditioning, spatial awareness, multitasking—so many benefits.”

“Why not?” Cole said.

She gave him her protective gear and paddles.

“Be careful not to smack the balls too hard,” Roulette warned. “The magnetics are set so they never slow down. You can get in trouble fast.”

“Is there a limit to how many balls can get going at once?” Cole asked.

“The court supports up to a hundred,” Roulette said. “It won’t spit out more until less than a hundred are in play. I just got up to about forty. I’ll be impressed if you reach ten.”

“What’s the most balls you’ve had going?” Jace asked.

“Eighty-seven,” she said.

“What about Tricker?” Jace asked.

“Trickster,” Roulette corrected. “He can last for a while with a hundred in play. He’s tidy.”

“Tidy?” Cole asked.

“You know,” Roulette said. “Cool. Skilled. Tidy.”

“Is he a Crystal Keeper?” Jace asked.

“One of the best,” she said.

“You said he was the very best,” Jace reminded her.

“At the games,” Roulette said with a grin.

“I get it,” Jace said. “You’re the best out in the real world.”

“Maybe,” she mused. “You said it, not me.”

With the protective gear in place, Cole held out his ID card.

“Keep yours,” Roulette said, handing him hers.

“Having fun?” a voice asked from behind Cole.

Whirling, he found Dalton and Mira standing there. “You made it!” Cole exclaimed, a heavy weight of anxiety lifting.

Dalton grinned. “I was worried you might be looking for us. I’m glad you got to play some sweet games.”

Cole looked down at his gear and his paddles. “I was just blending in.”

Dalton looked him up and down. “This is probably the only place in the world where that outfit would seem normal.”

Cole smiled. “You guys made good time!”

“We came together,” Mira said. “We found each other as we left the station.”

“Mira is brilliant,” Dalton said. “After we figured out how the levcars work, she told an older guy out on the street that we were supposed to meet our parents at Hanover Station but used up our credits going to the wrong place. He let us ride with him to Hanover, then we came here.”

“You got to ride in one of those cars!” Cole exclaimed.

“It was freaky,” Dalton said. “It seems like you’re always about to crash.”

“You guys are okay?” Cole checked.

“We got away fine,” Dalton said. “No real trouble.”

A boy and girl stood with them who Cole hadn’t met yet. They both looked fourteen or fifteen. “This is Bluff and Dazzle,” Roulette explained.

Bluff had his hair shaved short and stood half a head taller than Jace. He looked serious and tough. Dazzle had a dark complexion, fair hair, and light eyes. She was built short and strong, like a gymnast.

“More Crystal Keepers?” Cole asked.

Bluff gave a small nod. “Call us CKs in public.”

“We’re supposed to take her straight to zerobase,” Dazzle said.

“I heard,” Roulette replied. “They’re not kidding about her. I wonder who she is?”

“I’m right here!” Mira complained.

“Don’t tell us,” Bluff said hurriedly.

“I won’t,” Mira said.

“We’re not supposed to ask,” Bluff explained. “You guys are top secret.”

“Don’t look,” Roulette said. “But we’re being watched.”

“Who?” Dazzle asked with a casual smile.

“Undercover City Patrol,” Roulette said. “He’s up on the platform behind me. I’ve seen him before. Definitely CP. He’s pretending to watch a game of Smashball.”

Cole glanced up and briefly met eyes with a blond man on a platform a good distance across the room. The man turned and walked down a flight of stairs.

“Bubba,” Roulette whispered loudly. “I told you not to look. He knows we made him!”

Cole shriveled inside but tried not to let it show. The glance had been automatic as Roulette described the patrolman’s position. But what a stupid mistake! He should have followed Roulette’s instructions!

“Get out of here,” Bluff said. “Take separate levcars to zerobase. Dazzle will take the girl and Dalton. I’ll run interference.”

Bluff split off, heading toward the blond man. Roulette led the others in the opposite direction, across the gaming floor.

“Did you see him?” Roulette asked Dazzle.

“His reflection,” Dazzle said, holding up a small cosmetic mirror.

“Have you noticed him before?” Roulette asked.

“First time,” Dazzle said.

“He was probably following you,” Roulette said. “I know his face and didn’t see him until you guys showed up. Cole, lose your gear, we’re about to go out a side door.”

Cole started fumbling with the straps of the pads he had just put on. He felt flustered and off-balance. Dalton and Jace helped him as they walked.

As they reached a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, Cole pulled off his helmet, the final piece of gear.

“Drop the stuff,” Roulette advised as she opened the door.

Cole, Jace, and Dalton dumped the pads and paddles on the ground beside the door and followed the others through. Roulette and Dazzle broke into a run. Cole ran his hardest, trying to keep up.

They passed through another door onto a sidewalk beside a street. A busy stream of levcars zoomed by.

Dazzle glanced over at Roulette. "You have an untraceable ID?"

"Always," Roulette said.

Dazzle put on a cap and a pair of sunglasses. "Use it."



## CHAPTER

# 10

## GOOGOL

Cole found riding in a levcar even more nerve-racking than Dalton had conveyed. The ride was reasonably smooth, but Cole wasn't used to cars crowding so tightly at high speeds, nor was he accustomed to vehicles working together with split-second precision to narrowly avoid accidents.

Sitting in the back beside Jace, Cole needed some time before he began to trust that the system actually worked. Over and over he braced himself for impacts that never came. When he closed his eyes, the ride seemed surprisingly uneventful, but that felt like cheating. As Cole got used to the experience with his eyes open, the overall synchronization made him think of a flock of birds or a swarm of bees.

Mira and Dalton had gone in one direction to get a levcar with Dazzle. Cole and Jace had gone the other way with Roulette, who summoned a levcar using an ID without a face on it. They had now been in the car for at least ten minutes, and Cole had seen no sign of Bluff or the blond patrolman.

"Did we get away clean?" Cole asked.

"I think so," Roulette said. "We'll take extra precautions to make sure."

"Do you think Bluff fought that patrolman?" Cole asked, his insides writhing with guilt.

"As a last resort, maybe," Roulette said. "Hopefully he found a quieter solution. Bluff will be okay. He knows what he's doing."

Cole tried to let her confidence reassure him. They rode along in silence for a few minutes. Cole studied the neighboring levcars for anything

suspicious, but the windows were too tinted to see much. At least that same tinting would help them hide.

“What do you think?” Cole asked Jace, who had his nose against the window.

“This city is enormous,” he said. “I was ready for big, but I still can’t believe it. I didn’t expect it to be so clean, with so many open spaces. I pictured it more cramped.”

“What about the ride?” Cole asked.

“You can’t beat it,” Jace said. “They’re so fast. They blow away autocoches.”

Cole gritted his teeth as levcars swerved at them from opposite directions. Their levcar sped up and drifted right just in time to avoid disaster. “Don’t the near misses bug you?”

“They told us levcars don’t crash,” Jace said.

“Not in over eight years,” Roulette said. “And before then problems weren’t frequent. They’ve been perfected.”

“I can trust that,” Jace said. “Can’t you?”

Cole resisted a wince as they knifed through a narrow gap. “There’s what I know, and what I feel. We have cars where I’m from, but there would be accidents all over the place if people drove like this.”

“You keep advertising that you’re from Outside,” Roulette said.

“Whoops,” Cole replied.

“I won’t spread it around,” Roulette said. “You’re not the only person from Outside in Zeropolis. Only Creon interacts more with Earth. But Outsiders do draw attention. If you want to keep a low profile, you should be more careful. We’re almost to the galleria.”

Up ahead, a complex of sizable buildings that looked like greenhouses came into view. The levcar slowed and drifted over to the curb, coming to a gentle stop. Cole, Jace, and Roulette got out.

“Greenhouses?” Cole asked.

“Stores,” Roulette said. “It’s a shopping mall.”

“All the buildings must be crystal,” Cole said.

Roulette gave him a puzzled look. “What else would they be made from?”

“Glass,” Cole said.

She chuckled. “Seriously? Why would we build with something so fragile? Bonded crystal is the way to go. If you want glass, you’ll have to look in some

other kingdom.”

“These are all stores?” Jace checked as they started walking. “Have you heard of Headgear?”

“Sure,” Roulette said. “It’s not here. I’m not interested in the stores today. We came for the crowd. I want to make sure we shook the CP. The Zeroes have gotten too good at tracking us lately. We’re taking a roundabout route. We can’t risk compromising the base.”

“Zeroes?” Cole asked.

“It’s a nickname for the patrolmen,” she said. “The Zeroes have been on a roll lately. We can’t be too careful. Let’s wait to go into it until we’re behind closed doors.”

As they proceeded through the crystal mall, Cole saw a lot of people wearing leather and denim. Many of the stores featured gadgets. Others sold clothes. A few had art. One shop showcased a variety of robots. They looked more polished than the robots back at Outpost 121, with brighter colors and more graceful contours.

They passed beyond the crystal stores and came to an open green area with a fairly tall hill on one side. A game of lacrosse was in progress on a large playing field. Trees shaded much of the hill, and paths gave access to the top.

“Summit Park,” Roulette said. “Crossing open space can be a great way to make sure we’re not being tailed.”

“Are we close to where we’re going?” Jace asked.

“Not yet,” she said.

It took some time to navigate the park. Eventually they passed under a street and came up to a wide pedestrian walkway. The apartments on both sides of the walkway possessed stately brick facades. Trees and sculpted hedges added a touch of nature.

Roulette led them along the walkway a good distance, passing under two more streets before turning onto a smaller walkway. She paused at the entrance to a building. “Nobody is following us. This way.”

They entered the building and went down a hall to an apartment on the first floor. The big guy who answered the door nodded to Roulette and let them enter. They went to a bedroom without windows and found a stairway in the middle of the floor.

“I opened it up for the others,” the man said, coming in behind them. “Go on down. I’ll close it behind you.”

The stairs descended a long way, flight after flight. Roulette was in no hurry.

“Nice secret entrance,” Cole said.

“Let’s hope it stays secret,” Roulette replied. “Otherwise we’re all cooked.”

At the bottom of the stairs awaited a thick crystal door secured by shiny steel hinges. Roulette waved at the guards on the far side, and after a moment, the door opened. Cole entered with the others, and the door closed behind them.

The floor, walls, and ceiling had panels like in the P’Tang room at Axis. Cole sped up to walk beside Roulette. “Is this room magnetic?” he asked.

“We have some skilled tinkers on our side,” she said. “Our magnetic defenses are tidy. Think of the balls in P’Tang, but imagine them sharper, faster, and targeted at you.”

Cole gulped.

They proceeded through a sequence of doors and hallways until they were greeted by a middle-aged woman whose red hair was pulled back into a tight little bun. “You must be Jace and Cole,” she said, holding out a hand.

Cole shook it. “I’m Cole.”

Jace did the same. “Jace.”

“Call me Highwire,” the woman said. “Nice work, Roulette. Report to the tank for debriefing.”

“I was kind of hoping to see this through,” Roulette said.

“You may have future involvement,” Highwire said. “First these two must meet with Googol.”

Roulette gasped. “Googol’s here! I want to see him!”

“I expect he’ll want to talk with all the CKs who were involved today,” Highwire said. “First head to debriefing. You’ll learn more there.”

“Whatever,” Roulette said huffily. She left the room.

“I trust you two are all right?” Highwire asked.

“We’re fine,” Cole said. “We’re worried about Joe, though.”

“Aren’t we all,” Highwire said. “This way.”

She used an ID card to open a door. They followed her down a hallway to another door, which she opened with her card as well.

“Here they are,” Highwire announced. “Barely behind the others.”

Cole and Jace entered a room that looked half laboratory, half office. One

side of the room had work counters and shelves covered with diverse tools and materials. The other side had several chairs and a big desk. Dalton and Mira sat in two of the chairs.

The man behind the desk stood up. Dressed in dark blue, his bristly gray hair was clipped short and thinning on top. The bulky glasses he wore resembled a set of high-tech binoculars. Tall, skinny, and slightly stooped, he looked to be in his fifties or sixties. “Cole, Jace, please join us. Nice to meet you. I’m Googol.”

“Will that be all?” Highwire asked.

“Yes, Lorraine, thank you,” Googol said. She backed out and closed the door. Googol touched his bulky glasses. “Please forgive how my vision gear hides my face. With it, I can see near and far. Without it, the world becomes overlapping blurs. Have a seat.”

“Are you guys good?” Cole asked Dalton.

“We just got here too,” Dalton said. “We’re good.”

“Googol was introducing himself,” Mira said.

Googol nodded. “I gave Mira a code word reserved for those few who work with her mother, Harmony.”

“Dalton got to hear it?” Cole protested.

“He whispered it to her,” Dalton said.

“Googol is one of the good guys,” Mira confirmed.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Googol said deferentially. “I can still hardly believe you’re here.”

“He’s one of the leaders of the Unseen in Zeropolis,” Mira said. “He’s their chief tinker.”

“We all have roles to play,” Googol said. “Mine involves developing and implementing advanced technologies.”

“Your name is Google like the search engine?” Cole asked.

Googol smiled. “It’s spelled differently. My code name derives from a number. Ten to the hundredth power. In other words, a one followed by a hundred zeroes.”

“That’s a lot of zeroes,” Jace said.

Googol’s smile faltered a little. “My apologies. I’m not always adept at small talk. I know you four have been through a lot, but we have some vital matters to discuss.”

“Fine with us,” Mira said.

“The first issue is Joe MacFarland,” Googol said. “We sent him to warn you, Mira, when we learned that your father was sending legionnaires to apprehend you. I take it the intervention was a success.”

“Barely,” Mira said. She went on to explain how she, Cole, Jace, and Twitch had escaped from Skyport.

“Remarkable,” Googol said. “But Joe clearly rejoined you.”

Mira told about defeating Carnag and then going to Elloweer with Joe to find Honor.

“Any success?” Googol asked.

“We found her, and stopped another monster shapecrafters had made in Elloweer. Her name was Morgassa, and she was even worse than Carnag. We also found Cole’s friend Dalton.”

“You’re both from Outside,” Googol said, his vision gear aiming at Dalton and Cole. “Where did you live?”

“Arizona,” Cole said. “Mesa, if you know the area.”

“I do,” Googol said. “I study your world a lot. It didn’t used to interest us so much. For centuries our technologies have been more advanced than yours. But over the last few decades, as you have entered your computerized age, I have found many good ideas among your innovations. I find that inspiration often results from observation.”

“In our world we call that copying,” Dalton said with a smile.

“I attempt to adapt and improve those technologies that inspire me,” Googol said. His vision gear swiveled back to Mira. “These shapecrafted monsters you describe perturb me. We have heard similar tales of late from Creon and Necronum, though none in our own kingdom. You say the shapecrafters could not command their creations?”

“Not Carnag or Morgassa,” Mira said. “I don’t know if they’re getting better at it.”

Googol raised two fingers to his lips and stared thoughtfully. The lenses of his vision gear turned softly, as if focusing. “How close has your father come to capturing you?”

“Close,” Mira said. She told about the Hunter chasing them and detailed their encounters with Enforcers in Sambria and on the Red Road.

“The Hunter is formidable,” Googol said broodingly. “And you encountered his Enforcers in Elloweer scant days ago?”

“Yes,” Mira said.

Googol rubbed his chin. “Honor didn’t join you after defeating Morgassa?”

“No,” Mira said. “She went to find another of my sisters. I came here with Joe to look for Constance.”

Googol frowned. “Joe knows that you’re here looking for Constance. He also knows that Honor is off hunting for another sister. Does he know where she went?”

“Yes,” Mira said.

Googol nodded slowly. “Don’t tell me where unless I need to know. We must do a better job of restricting information. Joe knows too much. I’m not sure if the City Patrol fully grasps yet what they have in him.”

“Maybe they won’t figure it out,” Mira said. “Joe is smart and committed.”

“The Hunter is on your trail,” Googol said. “It won’t take him long to find Joe. We can’t risk Joe breaking. He’s a good man, and a brave one, but I would not trust anyone to last against the Hunter. Even without the Hunter, there is the chance the City Patrol will catch on to Joe’s value. You were seen with him, Mira. Your image is on an ID card. If they connect Joe to you, they’ll torture him without mercy until he talks. We have to take him away from them. It’s not just a matter of loyalty. It’s a strategic necessity.”

“Can you do it?” Mira asked.

“I believe so,” Googol replied. “Not without cost. We have a few remaining ways to monitor City Patrol communications. One method is thanks to good tech, plus, we still have a couple of people inside. We used to enjoy a much bigger advantage. The government had all the power, but we kept really good tabs on them and could stay out of their way. We could truly be Unseen.”

“What happened?” Cole asked.

Googol smiled sadly. “We’re not sure. Starting about two months ago, things changed. Some of our best people got busted. Smart, careful operatives who really knew the game. Within weeks, the Unseen lost nearly a quarter of our number. Secure, time-tested hideouts were discovered. Proven methods of operation no longer worked. The government didn’t just have all the power. Suddenly they were outmaneuvering us.”

“Did you fix the problem?” Jace asked.

“In a sense,” Googol said. “Most of the Unseen retreated to our hideaways in Old Zeropolis. We took ourselves out of play.”

“Old Zeropolis?” Cole asked.

“A brief history for the Outsiders,” Googol announced. “Zeropolis has been built twice before. Originally, long ago and far from here, Zeropolis arose with much less advanced technology. Innovation eventually made the first Zeropolis obsolete. The foundations were all wrong to welcome the new tech. It made more sense to start again. So a new Zeropolis, the second Zeropolis, what we now call Old Zeropolis, was established not terribly far beyond the northern boundaries of this city. That city fell when Aeronomatron took over. Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost.”

“Who took over?” Dalton asked.

“A machine,” Googol said. “A supercomputer that would dwarf anything your society has produced. Most people just call it Aero. This was in my grandfather’s time, and I’m older than I look, thanks to my shaping skills slowing the aging process. After much bloodshed, the City Patrol managed to seal off Aero. Had they failed, this entire kingdom might have become uninhabitable.”

“Crazy,” Cole said.

Googol rocked forward in his seat. “To this day, Aero controls a major portion of Old Zeropolis. At great cost, all of its manufacturing capabilities were destroyed, so the computer’s domain is fixed. After the mayhem Aero caused, nobody wanted to live near it, so the newest Zeropolis, this one, was erected not far from the old. After the second city was left abandoned for a good while, some people began to return. The kind of people who didn’t want to be found. Old Zeropolis is a lawless place, almost completely unregulated. Someday the Zeropolitan government hopes to purge or reclaim the old city, but they haven’t geared up for it yet. For now, the Grand Shaper lets it serve as a garbage dump for undesirables.”

“Is Old Zeropolis mostly members of the Unseen?” Cole asked.

“Oh, no,” Googol said. “It’s mostly criminals. In a highly regulated kingdom, it’s the most significant beacon of chaos. When operating there, we have to tread warily. But at the moment it’s preferable to the city. The government has little influence there.”

“Are we safe here?” Jace asked, looking around the room.

“I hope so,” Googol said. “As a defensive tactic, I move around a lot. This is currently our most secure base of operations inside the city. But we don’t know how Abram Trench and his people keep finding us. I worry they’re using banned tactics.”



“Like what?” Cole asked.

“In Old Zeropolis, they let Aero control too much,” Googol explained. “When the computer went bad, it had access to everything. Information. Communication. Essential services. Vehicles. Bots. You name it. Nobody wants another Aero, so the current Zeropolitan government has been very careful about not automating the city too much. None of the bots are armed. There are no surveillance cameras or automatic listening devices. Unconnected computers run different systems. For example, the computer that manages the magroads cannot communicate with the computers regulating the power facilities, or the computer that holds the ID card data, or any of the bots.”

“But now you wonder if Abram Trench is cheating,” Dalton said.

“Precisely,” Googol said. “He doesn’t want another Aero either. He definitely wants to call the shots, not bow down to a computer. But to deal with us, he may have decided to bend the laws that have been in place since the founding of this city. Added some surveillance systems. Upgraded some bots. Who knows? It might explain how the City Patrol has suddenly become so effective.”

“It could be a spy,” Jace proposed.

“We’ve examined that possibility thoroughly,” Googol said. “We keep our information fragmented and compartmentalized. Given all that has happened, I simply don’t know who the mole could be. My guess is either they’ve found a way to reliably intercept our communications, or they have new tech in place. We’ve been implementing all the precautions we can think of, including improved communication methods and taking extra care when navigating the city.”

“And using arcade kids,” Cole said.

“The Crystal Keepers have existed for years,” Googol said. “Many of them eventually graduate to membership in the Unseen. The government can’t find us where they’re not looking, and while many of our covers have been blown, our teenage agents remain undetected. They get underestimated because of their youth, and we use that against Abram.”

“Did Bluff get away?” Dalton asked.

Cole held his breath.

“Yes,” Googol said. “He took out the City Patrol agent with a sleeping dart and got away clean.”

Cole relaxed and breathed again. At least his mistake hadn't caused major harm.

"Using kids like that will only work until the government catches on," Mira said.

"Which is why I'm reluctant to overuse them," Googol said. "Over these past couple of months, many of our top spies have been exposed. Several of the key technologies we rely on have been discovered and thwarted. I hesitate to use what limited resources remain to spring Joe. It could inspire City Patrol to ferret out our last assets. But the alternative is more dangerous still."

"Because of how much Joe knows," Dalton said.

"It's his knowledge of Stafford's daughters," Googol said. "Our sources in Junction report that finding the five princesses is now the High Shaper's uppermost priority. It makes more sense now that I know Miracle and Honor both have reclaimed their powers. Stafford is panicking. He's bringing all of his resources to bear. What he currently lacks is concrete knowledge of their whereabouts."

"If Joe breaks under torture . . . ," Mira said.

"His information becomes a lightning rod," Googol said. "The High Shaper will bring his full strength against the Unseen in Zeropolis right when we're reeling. It could mark the end of the resistance here. On the other hand, if we can find Constance and help you avoid detection, Mira, we could revitalize the revolution. It's going to be all or nothing. The first step will be to retrieve Joe."

"Any idea where to find Constance?" Mira asked hopefully.

"Not yet," Googol said. "None of us knew about you girls until your mother confided in a few of us earlier this year. When Stafford began to lose his powers, she knew the time was approaching to bring her daughters out of hiding, and she needed allies. I only recently learned how your mother can track your locations. Do your friends know?"

"Yes," Mira said.

"I found out about the stars when Harmony asked us to send someone to help you, Mira. Your mother has still never asked us to seek out any of her other daughters, though we were led to believe that Constance is hiding somewhere in Zeropolis. I will confess that I have been quietly searching on my own, but she is well concealed. I have no clue as to her whereabouts."

"She could be anywhere?" Mira asked.

“I have found no record of her,” Googol said. “Constance may have found shelter out in the empty wastes of Zeropolis. She could have an obscure hideout here in the city, or even in Old Zeropolis. For all I know, she might have moved to another kingdom. Only your mother knows for sure, but she has not yet shared that knowledge with us.”

“Can we contact my mother?” Mira asked.

“Not with a communicator,” Googol said. “Those signals don’t carry out of the kingdom. Not even into Junction, where all forms of shaping work to some degree. For sensitive matters, our contact has been through live messengers. Our last interaction came when she asked us to send Joe to help you.”

“Could we send a messenger to her?” Mira asked.

Googol became grave. “It would require the utmost caution. Particularly in the current climate, with your father raging, and the Zeropolitan government closing in, such a messenger represents a great deal of risk. An intercepted messenger could ruin us and your mother together. Your father still doesn’t know she was responsible for hiding you girls all these years.”

Mira rubbed her forehead. “It’s never easy.”

“Seldom, lately,” Googol said. “But that doesn’t mean we won’t try. We just have to make smart moves. Abram Trench would love nothing more than to get his hands on you, Mira.”

“Why’d he side with the High Shaper?” Cole asked. “The other Grand Shapers rebelled and went into hiding. What made Abram loyal to Mira’s dad?”

“I know Abram Trench well,” Googol said. “I served as his chief technical adviser for many years. Abram was seduced by the advantages of siding with Stafford. Abram Trench has no real loyalty to anyone besides Abram Trench. The better I came to know him, the more he brought me into his confidence, the more I feared him. Eventually it led to me quitting and joining the resistance.”

“What gave him away?” Cole pursued.

“The technology he withholds,” Googol said. “I want everyone in Zeropolis to benefit from our innovations. The citizens of Zeropolis could have television, their own Internet, private communicators, and more. But free communication is an enemy to control. So mass communication is heavily limited. Extensive restrictions also apply to individual communicators.

Abram has all but eliminated private forms of transportation in the city, and he's always looking for ways to reduce and track vehicles in the outposts. The list goes on. Abram works hardest to create tech and establish policies that will increase his personal advantage. The longer I worked with him, the better I understood the absolute control he wishes to achieve. I realized he has to be stopped."

"You mentioned he'd love to get Mira," Jace said.

"Abram Trench is a master politician," Googol said. "With how badly the High Shaper wants his daughters back, if Abram could find any of them, he would use the opportunity to create enormous leverage to further his aims."

"What does he want most?" Mira asked.

"Abram desires complete control of Zeropolis," Googol said. "He doesn't care about the other kingdoms. And he doesn't mind being polite to the High King if it means he can function as dictator here. Abram adores innovation, and his ambition knows no boundaries."

"You were his main techie guy?" Dalton asked.

"It was a position of great influence," Googol said. "I'll humbly admit to being one of the most talented tinkers and technomancers in the kingdom. But I'm not Abram's equal. The man is truly gifted. Whether he means to use those gifts for the common good is where I harbor my doubts."

"My father works with too many men like that," Mira said. "We'll stop him. The first step is to free Joe?"

"Yes," Googol said, his demeanor changing from thoughtful to businesslike. "Our opportunity will come tomorrow. He is currently at City Patrol Headquarters. He'll be transferred to a holding area. I believe we will be able to gather enough details to intercept Joe en route. The City Patrol will then have proof that we're still listening. If we succeed, such a bold crime will invite retaliation."

A soft *ping, ping, ping* began to chime. It made Cole think of the ding he sometimes heard in elevators.

Googol's face froze. "No," he whispered. "Not now."

"What is it?" Mira asked.

"That's the alarm," he said, his voice detached. "Highest alert. This base has been compromised. We're under attack."

## CHAPTER

# 11

## CONTINGENCY PLANS

“Please tell us you’re joking,” Jace said.

“Sadly, no,” Googol said, standing up as the pinging continued. He didn’t seem too anxious, but he began to speak more quickly. “Something about the way we brought you in or monitored Joe’s arrest must have given up our location.” He gathered equipment off the desk. “It’s a blow. This was our last fully equipped base of operations in the city.”

“Do you have an escape plan?” Mira asked.

“I always have contingency plans,” Googol said, removing a few small black boxes from a drawer and pocketing them. “Otherwise they would have nabbed me long ago. Here at zerobase, we have excellent defenses to slow any intruders.”

Cole relaxed a little. Apparently it wasn’t time to run for their lives yet. “You have secret ways out?” he checked.

“We regularly use three ways into the base from the surface,” Googol said. “We’ve reserved three different ways out for emergencies. All who work here know about one of them, a smaller circle knows about the second, and only two other people know the route we’ll use.” Googol came around the desk and went to the worktables. “Would you four mind helping me carry a few things?”

Cole, Dalton, Jace, and Mira hurried after Googol. They wove around the worktables as he picked up objects and handed them over. He gave them several crystals and a variety of gadgets.

Among other things, Cole received a short tube of dark metal. Googol unscrewed a cap at the base to reveal a button. “Keep that button covered,” Googol said, replacing the cap. “Do not press it unless you are pointing the other end at your worst enemy.”

“I want one,” Jace whimpered.

“Don’t worry,” Googol assured him. “I have plenty of volatile toys.”

Highwire returned to the room holding what looked like an extra-large trapgun. Behind her came Roulette and a fairly tall teenage boy with Asian features. Both carried smaller trapguns.

“If you’re ready, we should go,” Highwire said.

“The evacuation?” Googol asked, still sweeping the worktables with his mechanized eyewear.

“In progress,” she said. “First lines of defense holding strong.”

Googol picked up a couple more devices. “I was tidying up.”

“Tidy,” Highwire said with a smirk.

“You sound like a CK,” Googol replied, shaking his head.

“That’s a compliment,” the Asian teen said. “Good to see you, Googol.”

“Hello, Trickster, Roulette,” Googol murmured, stepping away from the table. “Nice of you to join us.”

Cole took a second look at the teen after hearing him addressed as the gaming-hub champ. The boy looked relaxed and friendly.

“Why do we always see you when the sky is falling?” Trickster asked.

“Damage control is the story of my life,” Googol replied, striding toward the door. “Let’s go.”

The soft tone kept ping-ponging as they left the room and walked briskly down the hall. Googol led the way. Highwire brought up the rear, her giant trapgun held ready.

“What does this mean, losing the base?” Roulette asked as they walked.

“It hurts us,” Googol said. “I can’t say I’m shocked, given the events of the past couple of months. We’re missing something. Until we figure out what, this will keep happening. We’ll have to get by with our smaller safe areas and less activity until we solve this.”

“Won’t less activity make this harder to solve?” Trickster asked.

“You begin to understand our predicament,” Googol muttered.

Roulette turned to Cole. “Not a long stay at the base.”

“Nope,” Cole responded, concentrating on not dropping anything,

especially the weapon. The gear wasn't too heavy, but there were too many items to carry them comfortably.

"You're the gaming-hub expert," Jace said to Trickster.

"Somebody has to do it," Trickster said. He glanced at Mira. "And you're our top secret guest."

"Sorry if I caused this," Mira said.

"It's not your fault," Googol said. "I don't believe they're aware of your identity yet. It's either our sloppiness, or City Patrol's excellence. Maybe a little of both."

The group went through a couple of doors. Cole didn't see any other people. The only sound besides the polite alarm was their footsteps. Without anybody talking to distract him, it seemed like a fire drill at an empty school.

Googol stopped at a thick door of tinted crystal set in a metal wall and handed some of his gear to Trickster. Then Googol inserted a small, clear cube into a square socket. The crystal door slid upward.

They passed through the doorway, and Googol hit a button that shut the door. He walked to a round socket in the wall and placed a crystal sphere inside. A section of the wall opened to reveal a smaller room. They all entered, Googol pressed a button, the wall closed, and the little room sank.

"An elevator," Dalton said.

"A sender," Jace corrected.

After some time descending, the wall opened again. A large lab waited beyond, brightly lit, with crystal worktables and no people.

A humanoid robot stepped into view from off to the side, standing a bit taller than Googol. Its yellow, rounded contours left it bulky through the chest and shoulders, but more slender in the legs and arms. The only features of the smooth face were a pair of glowing eyes protected by a tinted crystal panel.

Cole felt somewhat intimidated. It looked like the robotic version of a linebacker. If it attacked in this close space, Cole wasn't sure what they could do.

"Welcome, Googol," the robot said in a male voice so natural that Cole wondered whether it could actually be a person in a costume. "The password, please."

"Green pastures," Googol said.

"The guests are here on your authority?" the robot inquired.

“Correct,” Googol replied. “The key elements have been removed?”

“Everything besides me and the little guy,” the robot said.

Googol started walking across the lab. The robot fell into step at his side. The others followed. Twisting so he could point out the people he named, Googol said, “This is Cole, Jace, Dalton, and Secret. They deserve top priority protection, with Secret at the tip-top. You know the others.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” the robot said. “Especially you, Secret. I’m Outlaw.”

“Why are you called Outlaw?” Googol asked theatrically.

“My existence contradicts the AI Accords,” Outlaw answered.

“Freebots are illegal,” Googol explained, still walking. “Here in Zeropolis, we were skilled at constructing adaptive neural networks long before earthlings had dreamed of BASIC. We can make very smart machines. Extremely lifelike, if not actually alive. Which led to Aeronomatron and the fall of Old Zeropolis. As a consequence, the AI Accords were adopted, limiting the use of artificial intelligence. Machines with AI are not permitted mobility, are forbidden access to weapons, and their communication with other thinking machines is limited and strictly monitored.”

“I break all of those rules,” Outlaw said with smug relish.

“Working outside the system should include some advantages,” Googol said, pausing at a gleaming steel door and pressing a cube into a socket. The door slid upward. “Outlaw is one of them.” He paused. “Don’t get me wrong. I don’t want another Aero either. But to fight a strong enemy, we need strong allies. Besides, you’re not going to try to conquer Zeropolis, are you, Outlaw?”

“Like I’d tell you,” the robot replied.

“He has attitude,” Googol said, leading them into the room.

“Learned it from the Crystal Keepers,” Outlaw said.

“That’s right!” Trickster said, slapping the big robot on the arm.

Cole entered a room with a few benches and a worktable. Tall, metal lockers lined the walls.

“We’re suited up,” Roulette said. “Do we need more?”

“Not you,” Googol said. “Them. They’re in deep. This base failed them. We need to help them protect themselves.”

“Or kill themselves,” Trickster said. “Or give themselves away. Is this a good idea?”



“It is if you help them,” Googol said. “They’ll need a crash course in safety.” He tapped a button on his vision gear. “We have time. The defenses are holding nicely.”

“Sorry I’m late,” said a little robot, the voice male but much less manly than Outlaw’s. “I was making sure the last of the bots got away.” Barely taller than Cole’s waist, it had a body the shape of a gumdrop, green with white highlights, though it looked a bit banged up and scratched. The robot scuttled on six insectile legs, each with a rubbery hoof at the end. Several small sensors poked out of the top, above three glassy eyes. It pulled a cart.

“This is Sidekick,” Outlaw said. “He’s, well, my sidekick.”

“Not everyone can be the hero,” Sidekick said good-naturedly. “I’m really good at sanitizing, though.” As with Outlaw, Cole was struck by how lifelike the voice sounded.

“Don’t be fooled by his modesty,” Googol said. “Sidekick’s AI is just as sophisticated as Outlaw’s, though I housed it in the shell of a used cleaning bot.”

“What I lack in size, I make up for in dents,” Sidekick said brightly.

“Please place the items we brought from my office on Sidekick’s cart,” Googol said, taking his own advice. Cole and the others added their items as well.

“You mentioned giving us something?” Jace prompted.

“We detoured here to equip the four of you with exo rigs,” Googol said. “Subtle exoskeletons that hide under your clothes but will enhance just about every physical attribute you possess. They fall far short of a full battle suit, but can still be extremely useful. The Crystal Keepers use them routinely.”

“Wait a minute,” Jace said, turning to Roulette, eyes narrowing. “You’re wearing one now?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “Almost always.”

“No wonder you’re so good at those games!” Jace cried.

“The rigs aren’t a replacement for skill,” Trickster stated adamantly. “If anything, they require more control. You have to learn to work with the suit, and to understand the limits. With rigs you can run faster, jump higher, react quicker, and survive more damage. But you can also wreck more spectacularly. And you can give yourself away. Unless you lost a limb or need them for other medical reasons, people aren’t supposed to wear mechanical augmentations.”

“All true,” Googol said. “Might we suit them up as we continue? We’re still under attack.” He walked toward some of the lockers against the wall. “Lockers one through four. I deliberately had the prep bots leave our newest model in the appropriate sizes. Those who know the drill, pick somebody to help.”

“The outer defenses are about to fall in sector five,” Outlaw reported.

“We still have time,” Sidekick said.

Highwire went to Mira, Googol helped Dalton, Trickster assisted Jace, and Roulette brought a bundle of gear over to Cole. The gear didn’t look like much—mostly narrow strips of pliable steel. Highwire led Mira out of the room to change.

“Shirt off,” Roulette said. “And your pants. Pretend you’re going swimming.”

Trying to act casual about it, Cole stripped down to his boxer shorts. It was like a visit to the doctor, right? If the doctor was about fourteen, cute, confident, stylish, and awesome at arcade games.

Roulette did nothing to make him feel uncomfortable. She strapped a fairly large brace to his torso, Cole fastened another to his pelvis, then Roulette attached smaller braces to his elbows, knees, and ankles. It didn’t take long. None of the braces were bulky, and all were connected by flexible metallic strips that squirmed against his skin with a life of their own. As the exoskeleton adjusted, Cole could feel it gripping his entire body.

“Careful how you move,” Roulette warned. “The rig is smart. It’ll work with you if you let it, but sudden, unpredictable motion can confuse it. Keep your movements controlled. Nothing extreme. Don’t run or jump.”

Cole started walking. It was strange to feel the exoskeleton assisting him. Back at his home in Mesa, when he walked up the stairs in front of his dad, his father would sometimes grab the back of his thighs just above the knees and help push his legs up the steps. This was similar, but as he experimented, the exo rig seemed to cover every movement of his arms and legs.

“Get dressed,” Roulette said.

Cole obeyed. None of the new equipment was bulky enough to make it tough to put his clothes back on. Mira returned to the room. Jace and Dalton got their clothes in place too.

“No wrists, gloves, or helmets?” Trickster checked.

“Correct,” Googol said. “This needs to be covert. The rigs are just an

emergency precaution.”

“Okay,” Trickster said, raising his voice a bit. “I want each of you to try a little hop. Just enough to get you past your tiptoes.”

Cole bent his knees and did a gentle hop. He went higher than expected, as if he had caught somebody’s bounce on a trampoline.

“If you jump hard, you’ll hit the ceiling,” Trickster said. “Try a little higher than the first hop.”

Cole glanced at Dalton, who grinned from ear to ear. “These are like training wheels for life,” his friend said.

Turning his eyes toward the ceiling, Cole saw that it had to be fifteen feet overhead. Could he really touch it? That would mean he could slam-dunk a basketball! Where were these rigs during PE?

Jace shot up into the air, stretching for the ceiling and coming just short. Dalton did a more modest jump, but his feet still went a little higher than Cole’s head. Mira went higher than Dalton but not as high as Jace.

Cole didn’t want Jace teasing him, so he tried a pretty strong jump. The ceiling came at him fast, forcing him to use his hands to absorb the impact. Fortunately, the exo rig helped brace his effort. Then he fell back down, scared about how he would land, but the rig assisted there, too. It was like his legs had shocks now. Good ones.

“Follow directions, Cole,” Jace mocked.

“Whoa, you okay?” Dalton asked, coming to Cole’s side. “For a minute there, it looked like you were planning to find your own way to the surface.”

“I’m good,” Cole said, feeling a little shaky. “I wasn’t expecting so much power.”

“You squatted pretty deep before you jumped,” Trickster said. “The rig read that you really wanted some altitude.”

“The outer defenses have been breached in sector five,” Outlaw said. “Sectors one and three won’t hold much longer.”

“Keep going, Trickster,” Googol said. “They need the basics.”

“Okay,” Trickster said. “When you walk or run with normal strides, the rig won’t push hard like when you jump. It’ll flow with you. But you’ll find your top speed higher and your ability to change direction enhanced. You’ll get the feel by experimenting. Now, just with your arms, throw some punches. Don’t actually hit anything. Beat up the air.”

Cole punched and felt the exo rig moving with him, increasing the force of

his blow. He looked over at Dalton who had both hands going really fast—left-right-left-right-left-right. Cole tried it and found he could do the same thing.

“See, Cole and Dalton?” Roulette asked. “Experiment with quickness. You can be faster. Your reaction time isn’t quicker, but once you start moving, everything is sped up. Try karate moves. Have fun with it.”

Cole did imaginary blocks and turns and punches. He loved the feel of his new speed and the power behind his movements.

“Now the bad news,” Trickster said. “If you go punch a crystal wall right now as hard as you can, your finger bones will turn to dust. Punch somebody in the face, and you’ll hurt them, but you’ll also probably break your hand. Cole almost gave us a demonstration. If he hadn’t used his arms against the ceiling when he jumped, he might have cracked his skull and broken his neck. We aren’t invincible in these things. In some ways, we can do more harm to ourselves.”

Cole gaped at Trickster. A warning about that before he’d jumped would have been nice!

“As you improve, you’ll learn all sorts of tricks,” Roulette said. “Jumping can be especially useful if you do it creatively. For example, once you get the feel, you can leap back and forth between the walls of an alley to climb.”

“But you don’t want to mess around with those kinds of techniques yet,” Trickster said. “Practice advanced moves in a controlled environment.”

Cole couldn’t resist. His jump to the ceiling had given him a feel for how much the rig augmented his leaps, so aiming just above the lockers, he sprang to one side, kicked off the wall, flew across the room, kicked off the opposite wall, and landed just about where he had started.

“What?” Trickster laughed, clapping his hands. “Are you kidding me? That was *tidy*! No way was that luck!”

“I’ve done a lot of jumping lately,” Cole said, unable to suppress a smile. Using the rig felt a lot like leaping with a Jumping Sword. The jumps weren’t as big, but he didn’t have to point at his target and shout a command. It felt easier. More intuitive. “Secret will be good at it too.”

“I’m pleased you’re getting a feel for the rigs,” Googol said. “Remember, once you’re out in the city, the goal is to move about like a normal citizen. The rig should only come into play in an emergency.”

“Isn’t this already an emergency?” Sidekick asked.

“You know what I mean,” Googol said. “We should go.”

He walked out of the locker room, back into the lab. The others followed, including the robots. On the far side of the lab, Googol opened a cleverly concealed sender. They all entered and it began to descend.

“I won’t come with you,” Googol said. “My face is well known, so my presence could unnecessarily endanger you. I will escape by a less comfortable route with Highwire and Outlaw. Trickster and Roulette will escort the rest of you to Forge’s place. Sidekick will accompany you. Outlaw would draw immediate attention. Sidekick’s commonplace appearance enables him to blend in throughout the city.”

“That’s what the lady bots are looking for,” Sidekick said knowingly. “Commonplace.”

“Don’t worry about his personality,” Googol said. “He knows how to act like a regular cleaning bot when necessary.”

Sidekick began to speak in a deliberately robotic monotone. “I am a robot. I love to wipe coun-ter-s and scrub toi-lets. Take me to your lea-der.”

“Outlaw, could you bring the cart Sidekick was pulling?” Googol asked.

“Yes, mas-ter,” Outlaw said in a deeper robotic monotone.

“I suppose I set myself up for that one,” Googol said. “Secret, I’ll leave you with communicators.” He held up four black rectangles about the size of dominoes. “Trickster will teach you how they work.”

The sender stopped and the doors opened. They stepped out into a close, domed tunnel covered in white tiles. It extended a great distance in opposite directions.

“Harmonic crystals are the key component to the best communicators,” Googol said. “The tech relies on the principle that harmonic crystals can share energy. For energy to be shared, and for communication to take place, the crystals must share the same harmonics. Think of it like a radio frequency, but with many more variations. Through tinkering, there are nearly infinite harmonics to choose from. The four crystals in these communicators form a unique set, meaning these communicators can reach one another but nothing else. Don’t overuse them, but if needed, you have them. I’ll keep one. Trickster, Secret, and Roulette will hold the others. Obviously, don’t let a communicator get captured. Roulette, show Secret how to destroy hers in case she’s taken.”

“So right when she most needs it she won’t have it?” Jace asked.

“She can get off a message first,” Googol said. “When destroyed, the

communicator also sends a signal to alert the others. This is where we part ways. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Listen to Roulette and Trickster. I leave you in the care of two of our best."

"Wait," Cole said. "One question. I'm looking for friends who were taken from my world as slaves with me. I know some are in Zeropolis. Can you help me find them?"

"You're going to the right place," Googol said. "Forge can help you with that. He can also connect you to a thruport so you can access the Internet in your world. But be warned—Outsiders are usually frustrated by the results."

"We know," Cole said. "Joe told us all about it."

Googol raised a hand. "Until we meet again."

"Which will probably be around the time of our next emergency," Trickster grumbled.

Googol gave half a grin. "He might be on to me. Good luck!"

## CHAPTER

# 12

## ENHANCED

“This is where we rejoin the city,” Trickster said. “We’ll come out in a pedestrian walkway under Flick Street. We have hidden motion detectors in place. See that little light? When it turns green, the tunnel and stairways are empty.”

Cole looked at the red light. Then he peered down the dusty service tunnel that had brought them here.

Their underground adventure had started in clean, white corridors. As they passed through one-way checkpoints and secret doors, they began using abandoned subway tunnels, and the way became grimier. Roulette explained that Old Zeropolis had used subways much as the current Zeropolis used elevated monorails. Before the new Zeropolis existed, this area had been an outpost of the old city.

“No more hiding in tunnels for us,” Sidekick said. “Because we’ve run out of tunnels that will take us in the right direction. We’re going topside. Sorry I’m not taller. Sorry I don’t have eighteen weapons systems. I know I’m not much comfort compared to Outlaw.”

“You’ll blend in out there,” Roulette said. “Right now, that’s what we need.”

“I can climb stairs,” Sidekick said. “My forelegs shorten, the rear ones lengthen, and my base pivots. You’ll see.”

“I happen to know you have a few other surprises if we need them,” Trickster said.

“Shhh,” Sidekick hissed. “They’re not surprises if you tell everybody. I was managing expectations!”

The light turned green.

“Let’s go,” Trickster said, opening the door and letting Roulette exit first. “Remember, this is all about staying cool.”

“My personality is about to downgrade to cleaning-bot levels,” Sidekick said. “You may not notice me. But I’ll never be far.”

They all entered the pedestrian walkway. When Trickster closed the door, it disappeared, blending seamlessly with the wall. Cole stepped close and stared hard at where the door had been but could detect no evidence of it.

“It doesn’t open from this side,” Trickster said. “Come on.” He started toward the stairway at one end of the pedestrian walkway. Sidekick scuttled off toward the stairs at the opposite end.

“I have orders to stay with Secret no matter what,” Trickster said quietly. “If things get choppy, the rest of you can scatter. Stay low. Big jumps are a last resort. If we get split up, meet at the north shore of Mariner Lake.”

“Nothing will happen,” Roulette clarified. “This is just a stroll through the city.”

Walking up the stairs, Cole enjoyed the feel of the exo rig supporting his movements. If things went bad, at least he had a secret weapon.

Near the top of the stairs, Trickster glanced back at them. “You look like you’re going to a funeral. Come on! Race you to the statue!”

He ran up the last few steps, and the others followed. Before them spread a wide plaza of dull orange concrete. Flowers and an occasional tree grew in patches of soil protected by low wire fences. In the center of the plaza stood a large silver statue of a man holding a wrench over his head.

As Cole started dashing across the plaza, he realized that Trickster wasn’t going anywhere near full speed. He was going fast, but with the exo rig helping, it didn’t feel like more than a comfortable jog. There were people in the plaza, but not so many that their running had to bother anybody.

Still in the lead, Trickster glanced back, laughing. Cole couldn’t tell whether he was acting or actually goofing around. As the statue got nearer, Jace sped up, taking the lead. Cole resisted the urge to challenge him. They weren’t really running at top speed. If they did, they might draw real attention. But of course Jace wanted to win regardless.

With a little burst at the end, Trickster tied Jace as they reached the statue.



Laughing easily, Trickster gave Jace a playful shove, who responded by tapping Trickster on the shoulder with his fist.

“That run felt good,” Cole said to Dalton.

“Makes you want to test your limits,” his friend replied.

“Who is Terrance Styles?” Mira asked, reading the name at the base of the statue.

“The main engineer behind the magroads,” Roulette said. “Try not to care or you won’t look local.”

“This way,” Trickster said, keeping his tone light. He trotted toward the far side of the plaza.

Following him, Cole fought the urge to jump. He wanted to know what the exo rig could do. What was the maximum height he could reach? What was the fastest he could run? If he trained, how good of a fighter could he become?

Off to one side of the plaza, Cole noticed a couple of armed patrolmen talking to a girl. After his first glance, he refused to let his eyes return to them.

The low sun would set within half an hour or so. Cole wondered how far they were from Forge, whoever that was. Would they still be roaming the city at night?

On the far side of the plaza, Trickster led them down to another pedestrian walkway under a road. After a man in the tunnel passed them and went up the stairs, Trickster motioned for them to huddle closer.

“Lots of Zeroes out,” he said softly.

“I saw two,” Cole said.

“Six,” Roulette corrected. “Two in the plaza, four beyond the plaza on the streets.”

“That was my count as well,” Trickster said. “Too many.”

“Might be a coincidence,” Roulette said.

“They just raided our base,” Trickster argued. “It’s no coincidence. This isn’t their first raid. They know we have ways to escape. They’re combing the area.”

“Great,” Dalton said. He looked shaken.

Cole patted his back.

“Good thing we’re just a bunch of kids horsing around,” Roulette said.

“That’s the key, guys,” Trickster said. “The more on edge we should be, the more relaxed we need to become.”

“I know you were trying to loosen us up,” Jace said, “but is running the best idea if they’re looking for people on the run?”

“Not a bad point,” Trickster said. “No more races. But make sure to joke and tease and relax. Right now, not looking guilty is our best defense.”

They went up the stairs at the far side of the street and turned left, following the sidewalk. Trickster took out a little rubber ball and bounced it as he walked.

Cole poked Dalton’s arm. “I’m teasing you.”

Dalton swatted his hand away. “I’m bothered by your teasing.”

Cole poked him again. “I’m glad you’re bothered. It encourages me.”

“You guys sound like low-grade bots,” Roulette complained.

“We’re trying to follow instructions,” Cole said. “I don’t tease Dalton much. We’re out of practice.”

Jace flicked the back of Cole’s ear. “Let me handle the teasing.”

Cole flushed. “Handle it again and see what happens.”

Jace grinned. “See? Now you’re more believable.”

They rounded a corner. Up ahead maybe half a block, two patrolmen were coming toward them. Only a few people moved along the sidewalk between them.

“Somebody catch it,” Trickster said, tossing the bouncy ball over his shoulder.

Cole snatched at the tiny ball but missed. After it took a bounce, Jace backed up a couple of steps and grabbed it. Then he lobbed it up ahead of the group, gentle enough that Trickster caught up to it after one bounce.

Cole tried not to look at the patrolmen. And he tried not to obviously look away from them either. With a busy magroad on one side, and apartment buildings on the other, the only options were to duck into a random building, turn around, or walk right past the patrolmen. It looked like Trickster intended to stroll by them.

Trickster tossed the ball over his shoulder again. This time Cole caught it and bounced it up to him.

The patrolmen increased their pace. “A moment of your time,” one of the patrolmen said, trotting forward.

Trickster came to a stop. So did the rest of them. Cole tried to keep calm despite the convincing instinct that he should run for his life.

“We’ve had a couple of runaways reported,” the other patrolman said.

“We need to check your ID cards.”

“Sure,” Trickster said, producing a card. “We’re not runaways. Who are the kids?”

The patrolman scanned his ID with a small handheld device. “Winston Sykes,” the officer said. “Twelve years old. And Carla Rutherford. Eleven years old. Know either of them?”

Trickster shook his head. “They from around here?”

“This part of the city,” the patrolman replied.

Hanging back, Cole was close to total panic. Looking for two runaways would be a great cover if these patrolmen were really searching for Mira. But it would be foolish to run before he knew they were actually in trouble, in case the story was true.

The patrolman gave Trickster his card back and Roulette handed over hers. He scanned it and returned it. “Keep them coming,” the patrolman said.

Cole still had his ID card from Outpost 121. But wouldn’t it be linked to Joe somehow and immediately get him in trouble? Cole supposed the answer partly depended on whether or not the police were actually searching for runaways.

“What if we left our IDs at home?” Jace asked.

“Then I might suspect you’re who we’re looking for,” the patrolman said. “Everyone knows the law. When out in public, you have to keep your ID card on you at all times. Do you live nearby?”

“Sort of far,” Jace said. “Across the city a ways.”

“If you lived close, we could go to your home,” the patrolman said. “Living far away and not carrying ID means a visit to the patrol station and then contacting your parents.”

“He has his ID,” Cole said, getting out his own. “He just doesn’t trust patrolmen.”

“Don’t you have pictures of the runaways?” Mira asked. “Can’t you see we’re not them?”

“IDs, please,” the patrolman said, his tone making it clear that he was done conversing.

Cole gave the patrolman his ID card, then held his breath as it was scanned. The patrolman handed it back. “Next.”

Jace shared his ID. After scanning the card, the patrolman looked up at Jace intently, then glanced at his partner and gave a nod.

The other patrolman took out a gray rectangle and lifted it to his mouth. Trickster jumped and kicked the rectangle, his leg a blur. The communicator went flying.

Jace crouched forward, grabbed the other patrolman by his ankles, then yanked both feet forward and up. The patrolman went down hard, his back slamming against the sidewalk while Jace held his ankles high.

With a silver tube in each hand, Roulette covered the patrolman on the ground and the one still standing in white foam from neck to boots. She hopped away as the upright patrolman swung at her, but it was the only move he managed to make before the cloud of white foam hardened. Cole shoved him over.

“Run,” Trickster said softly, taking off down the sidewalk.

Cole started at a normal sprint, but realized that Trickster was racing at maximum speed. Exhilarated and scared, Cole pushed his pace to the limits.

The rig responded as desired, whipping his legs faster than they could possibly move unassisted. Cole dashed down the sidewalk at almost twice the speed of his normal sprint, the air rushing over him as if he were cruising along on a bike. He found that if he stretched his strides too much, he went from a sprint to a series of long, one-footed hops. Running at full speed had to look suspiciously fast, but the hops would draw even more attention, since the gait raised him up unnaturally high and was completely inhuman.

Trickster paused at the next corner. “You grabbed the communicator?” he asked Roulette.

“Dalton got it,” she said.

Holding up the gray rectangle, Dalton shook it gently.

“Nice,” Trickster said. “We wouldn’t be Crystal Keepers if we left an enemy’s harmonic crystal behind.” He held out a hand, and Dalton passed it to him. “Slick move, Jace, dropping that Zero.”

“Maybe we should keep running,” Jace said.

“Patience,” Trickster said, raising the communicator to his mouth. He lowered his voice a little and started running in place. “We’re in pursuit on Sexton Road between Haley and Braga. It’s the jackpot but we need reinforcements. Hurry.”

Trickster lowered the communicator. “Coggs, aren’t you on Voletta?” a voice replied.

Trickster ran in place again and raised the communicator. “Negative.

Followed a hunch and they ran. In pursuit on Sexton crossing Braga.” Trickster gave a pained grunt and dropped the communicator.

“Coggs?” came the voice from the communicator. “Coggs?”

Crouching, Trickster switched it off. “That’s how you buy a little time and move a bunch of the other patrolmen out of your way.”

“Won’t they see the guys on the sidewalk?” Cole asked.

“Maybe,” Trickster said. “Sexton runs parallel to this street, so the Zeroes will mostly use cross streets to get there.”

“People are already trying to help our victims,” Dalton said, looking down the sidewalk to where a man and a woman had stopped beside the cocooned patrolmen.

“People without communicators are trying to help patrolmen without communicators,” Trickster said. “We have a few extra minutes at least. I’ll take Secret under this road.” He pointed to the pedestrian tunnel that went in the direction they had been heading. To the left another pedestrian tunnel went under the perpendicular street. “Roulette, take the others that way. Don’t run.”

“I know when to run,” Roulette said, heading down the stairs.

Cole waved at Mira. “Stay safe.”

She nodded and followed Trickster. Jace looked after them in frustration.

“He’s good,” Cole said. “She’ll be safe.”

“Whatever,” Jace said, unconsolated.

“Unless she falls in love with him,” Cole mused.

“Shut up,” Jace said, following Dalton and Roulette.

Cole went with him. At the bottom, Roulette raced across the empty tunnel. Cole and the others followed her lead.

As they reached the top of the far side, they discovered a pair of patrolmen running toward them. One was a woman. Like some other pedestrians had done, Roulette flattened up against the building to let them pass. Cole, Jace, and Dalton did likewise. The patrolmen raced by them without a second look and hurried down the stairs to the pedestrian tunnel.

“Trickster isn’t dumb,” Jace said.

“He’s not,” Roulette agreed. “But he loves taking charge. It gets annoying.”

They started walking again. “Didn’t you like his plan?” Cole asked.

“The plan is fine,” Roulette said.

Cole thought she sounded a little jealous but decided not to push her.

A black levcar came zooming down the magroad, going much faster than Cole had seen any levcar drive. The other cars flowed out of the way, leaving it a clear lane.

“More patrolmen?” Dalton asked.

“That’s right,” Roulette said. “Black levcars are City Patrol. Everybody’s heading to Sexton. At least for now.”

Walking along a zigzag route between buildings and under streets, Cole couldn’t lose the knotted feeling in his stomach. He knew now that if they were stopped for ID cards, they were going to have to run. Well, at least Jace would. Cole wondered why his card hadn’t raised any red flags.

Their best bet was to avoid another confrontation with patrolmen. How many times could they get away? If a bunch of patrolmen converged with those web-shooting trapguns, none of them would escape.

Shadows stretched to gargantuan lengths, and then the sun slid below the skyline, turning the jutting buildings into silhouettes against a rosy backdrop. They occasionally passed robots—some were just walking around, one was repairing a streetlight, a few worked cleaning an empty fountain. Though he kept an eye out, Cole didn’t see Sidekick.

After some time, Roulette led them up a pedestrian bridge and over a busy magroad to an expansive park. Under dusky trees, they walked on scant paths until a lake came into view. Several docks hosted sailboats. Only a few vessels remained on the water, and they seemed bound for the shore.

“Mariner Lake,” Roulette said. “A place for city people to play boat captain. All of the craft have motors. The sails are mainly for show. I guess some people try to actually use them now and then.”

“I haven’t seen Sidekick,” Cole mentioned.

“He would have followed Secret,” Roulette said. “No offense, but she’s the one everybody most cares about. Your names aren’t even code words.”

“Like Roulette,” Cole said. “Or is that what your parents called you?”

“My parents were slaves,” Roulette said. “A lot of slaves in Zeropolis try to give their babies to the Unseen before they receive slavemarks. It worked. I’m free. But I don’t know my parents. It’s supposedly too dangerous if the babies who get free try to learn their heritage.”

“Have you tried?” Dalton asked.

“I wanted to when I was younger,” Roulette said. “By the time I was old

enough to do anything about it, I realized the rule was there for a reason.”

“Who raised you?” Cole asked.

“Different people,” Roulette said. “The kind of people who quietly want to do good, but don’t want full membership in the Unseen. There are lots of them here.”

“They named you Roulette?” Jace asked.

“I got that name from the CKs,” she said. “I guess I take risks.”

“Like what?” Jace asked.

Roulette paused and lifted her leg. “From shin down it’s all mechanical,” she said. “I guess that was the big one.”

Cole’s eyes widened. “What happened?” he inquired.

“Didn’t make a jump,” she said. “I thought I could, but came up short. It was an ugly landing—not on smooth ground. The rig I was wearing saved my life, but part of it broke, taking the end of my leg with it. I had other injuries, but losing the foot was the most permanent.”

Cole and Dalton exchanged a look. Even with everything Cole had seen here, somehow it didn’t stop surprising him how different life was for kids in the Outskirts. Back home he had never done anything that seemed dangerous enough to lose a leg. Roulette obviously did a lot more than just goof around in arcades. And she hadn’t let her injury stop her.

As they approached a long building on the lakeshore where people dined on a large patio, two figures came toward them. In the fading light it took Cole a moment to recognize Trickster and Mira.

“Clean getaway?” Dalton asked.

“Not until we’re safe inside Forge’s lair,” Trickster replied. “Glad to see you guys, though.”

“You got here first,” Jace said.

“Not by much,” Mira said.

“Any more drama?” Cole asked Mira.

“No fights with patrolmen,” Mira said. “Plenty of worry.”

“Come on,” Trickster said, leading the way.

“Has anybody seen Sidekick?” Cole asked.

“A few times,” Trickster said. “He keeps his distance. He isn’t a brawler. Many of his weapons don’t require him to be close.”

“Where was he when those patrolmen almost got us?” Jace asked.

“Maybe not near enough to help,” Trickster said. “Or maybe we were just

too quick. It didn't take us long to drop them."

"Would he have really done much?" Dalton asked. "He doesn't seem like the type."

"Don't underestimate Sidekick," Trickster said. "Sometimes good things come in small, dented packages."

Trickster led them away from Mariner Lake and back onto sidewalks. Before too long they reached a neighborhood where narrow walkways passed between large, bland buildings. Trickster paused at a plain door and used a card to open it.

"Is this a warehouse?" Dalton asked.

"It's a storehouse for obsolete tech," Trickster said. "One step up from a junkyard."

They entered and closed the door. Light leaked through the high windows along the perimeter of the cavernous room—a combination of moonlight and spillover from the streetlights. Large shapes hulked in the dimness, made rounded by plastic tarps.

Trickster led them along a maze of aisles through the shrouded stockpiles. He stopped at a hill of covered machinery and pulled up the tarp.

"This way," he said, motioning Roulette forward.

She ducked under the tarp cautiously. Cole followed. It was too dark to see much, so he moved slowly, worried about tripping. Roulette guided him between large pieces of equipment to a space in the middle. The others joined them.

"Come on," Trickster said, hardly raising his voice. "I know you see us, Forge! Let us in."

A hatch opened in the floor, flooding the space with light. Cole squinted until his eyes adjusted.

Trickster patted Dalton on the shoulder. "Now we've made a clean getaway."



## CHAPTER

# 13

## FORGE

**A**t the bottom of a long ladder awaited a room full of machines, computers, worktables, beanbag chairs, shaggy carpets, soda cans, Zowie wrappers, overloaded bookshelves, glowing crystals, faded posters, and a beat-up dartboard riddled with tiny holes. Two ceiling fans turned lazily, barely stirring the stale air.

A guy with greasy hair in a tank top sat cross-legged, tinkering with a little robot. He might have been in his late teens or early twenties. He smiled at Trickster. “I heard you were coming this way.”

“Not from City Patrol I hope,” Trickster said.

“There was plenty of chatter,” a girl said, coming into the room. She wore a scarf in her hair and loose pajamas. Her slippers looked like raccoons. “You guys had them scrambling.”

“Googol called me on my most private communicator,” the guy said. He looked at Mira. “You must be Secret. I’m Forge.” He nodded at the girl. “This is Scandal.”

“These are my friends Cole, Dalton, and Jace,” Mira said. Cole couldn’t help thinking their names sounded boring compared to Scandal, Trickster, and Roulette.

“So far they’re scrappier than they look,” Trickster said, slapping Jace’s arm. “You should have seen this one put a Zero flat on his back. Just grabbed his ankles and yanked the rug out from under him. It was tidy.”

Jace grinned proudly.

“Are you guys Crystal Keepers?” Cole asked.

“Former CKs,” Forge said. “Scandal and I graduated to full membership in the Unseen more than two years ago.”

“They’re both skilled tinkers,” Roulette said. “We call them our Gadgeteers.”

“Googol is the head Gadgeteer,” Forge said.

“We help him design the rigs,” Scandal added.

“We make all kinds of tech,” Forge said. “We run thruports, harvest data, intercept communications.”

“What do the Crystal Keepers mostly do?” Cole asked.

“Energy is transmitted by harmonic crystals,” Roulette said. “If you snag the right crystal, you get access to the entire network of crystals sharing the same harmonics.”

“It’s most valuable for spying,” Trickster said, displaying the communicator they took from the patrolman. “Which reminds me. Here’s another link into City Patrol comms.” He tossed it underhand.

“Nice,” Forge said, catching the communicator. “These have little crystals inside. The size doesn’t matter. It’s all about the harmonics.”

“You can also use a crystal to hijack energy,” Scandal said. “The monorail tracks and trains, for example, are powered by crystals harmonically linked to highly juiced crystals inside of power facilities. Tap into that energy, and you can power all sorts of things.”

“What about Sidekick?” Cole asked. “Is he coming in?”

“Sidekick is already here,” Forge said, pocketing the communicator. “The bot will stay outside as lookout. Secret, you’re so young. Why is Googol willing to torch our operations in Zeropolis to bring you in? He doesn’t care if we all go down as long as you’re secure. I’ve never heard him so adamant.”

“We’re not supposed to ask,” Trickster reminded him.

“When has that stopped us?” Forge argued. “We spend all day doing stuff we’re not supposed to do. It’s our job description. What does Googol really expect? He knows who we are. I’m asking. She can tell what she wants.”

“Keeping my identity secret doesn’t just protect me,” Mira said. “It protects you. Trust me. You don’t want to know why the government wants to find me.”

“I know it could endanger me,” Forge said. “And I want to know. I live to uncover secrets. I’m good at keeping them.”

“Me too,” Roulette said softly.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Trickster said. “If you’re spilling, I want in too.”

“Not me,” Scandal said. “I have enough trouble without soaking up high-stakes secrets Googol wants me to avoid.”

Mira glanced at Cole. He could tell that she was wavering. Who wouldn’t? These people were on their side and had just helped them evade capture.

“Up to you,” Cole said.

Mira sighed. “I really shouldn’t. It’s for your own good. Unless things go badly, you’ll find out sooner or later. The secret won’t keep forever.”

“Say no more,” Forge grumbled. “I won’t force the issue. I just couldn’t resist trying.” He rubbed his hands together. “For now, this will be your haven. We’ll wait for orders from Googol. I know you four need fresh ID cards. I’ll get you fed. A place to sleep. Anything else I can do for you?”

“Dalton and I are looking for some friends,” Cole said. “Googol told us you might be able to help.”

“Possibly,” Forge said. “Who are the friends?”

“We came here from Outside,” Cole said. “A bunch of other kids were brought here with us as slaves.”

“I noticed Dalton’s mark,” Forge said. “But you have a freemark.”

“It was a bondmark at first,” Cole said. “Long story. Anyhow, the High King bought the slaves with shaping powers and shipped them around the Outskirts. I found Dalton in Elloweer.”

“Do they have names?” Forge asked.

“Jenna Hunt,” Cole said. “Blake Daniels. Lacie Clark. Sarah, um, what’s Sarah’s last name?”

“I don’t know,” Dalton said. “I didn’t really know many of those kids well.”

“It might start with a *P*,” Cole said. “Anyhow, especially look for Jenna Hunt.”

“You know she came here?” Forge asked.

“No idea,” Cole said. “I just know she’s not in Elloweer.”

“The records I can check only cover Zeropolis,” Forge said. “And it’s a big city. I’ve lost access to some of our best databanks because they’ve swapped out crystals. Sometimes slaves are given aliases, especially new slaves, to wipe out the old life. I can’t guarantee success, but I’ll look.”

“What do you expect to do if you find somebody?” Roulette asked.

“Talk to them,” Cole said. “Free them if I can.”

“Fair warning,” Roulette said, folding her arms. “Freeing slaves doesn’t go over well. Once that mark is on there, you can’t really hide.”

“We freed Dalton,” Cole said.

“You *found* Dalton,” Trickster corrected. “You helped him escape. He’s not free. He still has his bondmark. He has to pose as a slave. That’s the best you can offer any slave. And if you take too many slaves, you get burned.”

“There are a lot of former slaves in the Unseen,” Roulette said.

“But they have to stay unseen,” Trickster said. “They can’t live normal lives.”

“This is still way better than actual slavery,” Dalton said.

“You were in Elloweer?” Forge asked.

“Yeah,” Dalton said.

“I can draft some ownership documents to match your new ID cards,” Forge said. “You want to belong to Cole?”

“Sure,” Dalton said.

“What about me?” Jace protested.

“Anyone but Jace,” Dalton replied. “No offense.”

“I’d be a good master,” Jace said. “I’m way more fun than Cole.”

“You can really create slave documents for Dalton?” Mira asked.

“I can make it all look fully legal,” Forge said. “Googol wants you to have the royal treatment.”

“Good,” Roulette said. “They could use haircuts.”

Cole fingered his hair. It was getting pretty long. He hadn’t cut it since . . . when? A few weeks before coming to the Outskirts?

“Your fakes are good?” Dalton asked.

Forge chuckled. “There’s a reason Googol sent you here.”

“He’s the best,” Trickster said. “As far as tech goes, this is Outpost 139. The cards won’t be fakes. Forge uses the same equipment as the government, and stashes the info in all the same places. These ID cards will be real.”

“Thanks for the oversell,” Forge said. “Takes all the pressure off me.”

“Let me see you,” Roulette said. She made Mira, Dalton, Jace, and Cole line up. Then she paced the line, inspecting them. “Yeah, okay. I see possibilities. I can make you guys look local. You’re not bad-looking youngsters. With the right clothes and some color in your hair? You could look tidy.”

“More importantly,” Forge said, “you’ll look different from your original ID photos. When we take pictures, I’ll want you to make faces. Nothing too drastic or the ID will look bogus. But scowl a little. Or smile really big. If we get it right, these new cards will let you start over.”

“And he can load up a bunch of credits,” Trickster said.

“We don’t want to get carried away,” Forge said. “Let’s just say you won’t be poor.”

“Will we get nifty names like you guys have?” Jace asked. “Can I be Wolfmaster?”

“You aren’t Crystal Keepers,” Trickster said.

“And we don’t put our code names on IDs,” Roulette added.

“I’ll handle the names,” Forge said. “You want some of the most common names in Zeropolis. Not the very most common. That can look like you’re hiding. Fifteenth to fortieth most popular is about right. Your original ID cards are compromised. Changing your looks and taking on common names will make it harder for the City Patrol to connect you to those original identities.”

“Try to make the new ones last a little longer,” Trickster said.

“It was out of our control,” Mira said. “Joe didn’t know his fake ID had been flagged.”

“That’s our other big challenge tonight,” Forge said. “Finding the best way to bust out Joe.”

“Do you know him?” Mira asked.

“He’s a good man,” Forge said. “We’ll find a way.”

“You mentioned you have access to thruports,” Dalton said.

“Right,” Forge replied. “You want to kidnap an old girlfriend too?”

Dalton blushed. “No. But it would be interesting to check my e-mail. Poke around a little.”

“As long as you don’t get your hopes up,” Forge said. “I’ve seen it a thousand times. Nobody you really want to contact will respond.”

“We’ve heard,” Cole said.

“I’ll set you up with thruports in the morning,” Forge said. “We’ll take care of the IDs then too. Tonight I have to help plan a jailbreak. Scandal will show you around. We have food and hammocks.”

“Is this place safer than the other base?” Jace asked.

“Fair question,” Forge said. “Short answer? Yes. A lot less people know

about my lair. Of the Crystal Keepers, only Trickster, Roulette, Duckling, and Jetstream know. Not many of the Unseen know either. Most of my forgeries are carried out remotely. Very few people come and go. The fact that Googol had you come here shows how highly he values you.”

“Which is what makes us so curious,” Trickster said.

“It also helps that we’re under a virtually abandoned storehouse,” Forge went on. “I have access to lots of weird spare parts when I need them, and nobody is ever around.”

“What about all the crystals you have?” Cole asked. “You’re connected to a lot of information. Could they trace those connections back to you?”

“Nice,” Forge said. “You’re thinking like a technomancer. Sure, there are ways, but I take lots of precautions. It wouldn’t be easy for them to figure out they could spy on me, and one of my alarms would almost certainly give them away if they tried.”

“Come on,” Scandal said. “Let’s get you some food.”

Cole and the others followed her through a tunnel to a low table. Dinner awaited them—cubes of meat, mashed potatoes, green beans, and cups of pale green liquid.

“Six settings,” Trickster said. “You didn’t think any of us would be captured?”

“I try to stay optimistic,” Scandal said.

They sat down on the benches on either side of the table. Cole skewered a meat cube with a fork, then sniffed it.

“Any guesses?” Dalton asked.

“Beef?” Cole tried.

“It’s kind of a mix,” Trickster said. “Don’t think of it as a certain type of meat or it seems gross. Consider it a highly processed celebration of all meat.”

Cole tried a bite. It was more tender and juicy than he expected, tasting more like sausage than steak. “Not bad.”

“If you want food fresh from a farm, Zeropolis is the wrong place to find it,” Scandal said. “But we have abundant food, it doesn’t cost much, it tastes pretty good, and unlike a lot of the processed food in your world, it’s highly nutritious.”

Cole sampled the potatoes. They didn’t quite taste real, but they had a nice buttery, cheesy flavor. He had never been a fan of green beans, but he tried to eat some to be polite.

“I like the drink,” Dalton said, taking a long sip.

“Me too,” Roulette said. “Limelicious. Sweet but not too sweet.”

“And lots of vitamins,” Scandal said.

As the food began to settle, Cole could feel the busy day catching up with him. Had he woken up today at that inn in Outpost 121? It felt like that had happened in another lifetime. His eyes were droopy.

“Let me take care of the plates,” Scandal said. “You guys must be exhausted. We’re not fancy here, but a good hammock can be pretty comfy.”

Cole followed her down a hall to a room with several hammocks at different heights. The room was kind of dumpy, the paint on the wooden walls stained and peeling, but the hammocks looked clean.

“We have several guest rooms,” Scandal said. “Take your pick.”

“Mind if I join you, Trickster?” Jace asked.

“Not a bit,” he said.

“Dalton and I will take this one,” Cole said.

“Sleep well,” Scandal said. “You’ll be safe here. Let me know if you need anything.”

Cole and Dalton went into their room. Dalton closed the door.

“Tired?” Cole asked.

“I feel like I just stumbled away from a plane crash,” Dalton said.

“Me too,” Cole said, flopping into a hammock. It swayed and creaked. He stared at the ceiling.

“How do we take off our exo rigs?” Dalton asked.

Cole laughed sleepily. “I have no idea. Hopefully I don’t do karate moves in my sleep.”

“Or jump.”

“Maybe the gear will help us sleep extra well.”

“Enhanced sleeping? Why not? The rigs improve everything else.”

“Don’t you want to see how high we can jump in them?” Cole asked.

“No way,” Dalton said. “I’d rather keep both my feet.”

Cole winced. “Can you imagine having part of your leg ripped off? Roulette is hard core.”

“They all are,” Dalton said. “It’s like we joined up with organized crime.”

“When the government is crooked, the outlaws can be the good guys. Like Robin Hood.”

Dalton sighed. “Are we going to be outlaws the rest of our lives?”

“Depends if the revolution succeeds.”

“Is it really our revolution?”

“You tell me. You’re the slave.”

“I’m serious,” Dalton said.

“Me too. As long as we can’t get home, it’s our revolution. And I may have an important part to play.”

Dalton snorted. “According to the evil creature from another world who got locked up for trying to take over the Outskirts.”

“Right,” Cole said drowsily. “According to him.”

“Did you notice that hanging out with Mira got us in trouble again?”

“It also helped us find people to get us out of trouble. Do you think the Unseen would have done all this for us without Mira?”

“Probably not,” Dalton said. “But we might not have been in trouble in the first place.”

“With all we’ve learned, we might get chased just as much with or without her,” Cole said. “We’re in pretty deep. Do you really want to leave her?”

Dalton paused. “I don’t think so. I just don’t want to forget our real goal—to find our friends and get home.”

Cole stared hard at the ceiling, mapping the discolorations. “Helping Mira is part of my goal now, Dalton. Trillian thinks I’m key to her winning. He’s creepy, but he supposedly can’t lie. Think about it. If Mira defeats her dad, we’ll be able to free all the kids who got taken and actually keep them safe. And we’ll have major resources to maybe find a way home.”

“Seems like we spend most of our time running,” Dalton said. “Is beating her father even possible?”

“If not, we at least try to save Mira. Maybe one of these days it will make sense to take off on our own. Until then, we help however we can. Or at least I will. What about you?”

“It’s all good as long as we stay free and can keep fighting. But what if we get captured? We came pretty close today to spending the rest of our lives imprisoned.”

“It’s not a game,” Cole agreed. “We could get killed. We could become prisoners. But they already took away our lives and our families. They already made us slaves. If we have a chance to fix things, I’m going to take it.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Dalton said.

“Maybe we’ll get some answers tomorrow,” Cole said. “Maybe we’ll even



find Jenna.”

“You sound sleepy.”

“I’m pretty far gone. You’re mostly talking to my subconscious.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“If I ever wake up.”

Sleep came almost instantly.

## CHAPTER

# 14

# SUBSTITUTES

Subject: Life and Death

Dear Mom, Dad, and Chelsea,

Please read this! I'm sending it from our family account, so maybe you'll open it. Or maybe nobody pays much attention to the family account anymore, since you all have your own e-mail addresses. You mainly had the family one for me, because you didn't want me to have my own address yet.

You're probably wondering who I am. I'm your lost son, Cole Randolph. You don't remember me, but I used to live with you up until last Halloween. I got kidnapped with a bunch of other kids in the neighborhood and we were all forgotten.

I used to be in the room by the bathroom, across from the spare bedroom. I don't know if you use my room for something else now, or if you just never go in there. A bunch of my stuff should be around if you haven't thrown it out. Pay attention and you might notice my soccer things (uniform, cleats, shin guards, trophies), or my schoolbooks, or maybe my video games.

Anyhow, that stuff is around because you used to have a son named Cole. A sixth grader. Me.

I was taken to a world in another universe called the Outskirts. That's why I didn't take out the trash on Halloween. I really meant to. But I got kidnapped.

I love you and am sorry about all the times I made you mad or did dumb stuff. I even love Chelsea.

You probably won't read this. And if you do, you probably won't understand or will think it sounds crazy. But you have a kid or brother named Cole. I'm in a bunch of the family photos. If you focus, maybe you'll notice me.

I'm trying to get home. I miss you.

Love,  
Cole

After reading the e-mail for the tenth time, Cole felt he had rid it of typos and expressed what he wanted to say. Arrow hovering over the send button, Cole checked the e-mail addresses one more time. It would send to his dad, his mom, his sister, and also back to the family account.

He clicked send.

A long examination of the family account inbox had shown no mention of him after Halloween. The days following the holiday had only routine messages. There was nothing in social media about his disappearance. Nothing in the news. The mass kidnapping had gone unnoticed, all of the kids forgotten.

Would somebody open his e-mail? His family had forgotten about him, but the e-mail wasn't coming from him. They should each think it came from some other member of the family. He also sent the e-mail to the family account, even though the inbox had many unopened e-mails. Based on what Joe had told him, his would join the disregarded spam. But he had to try.

Cole wondered if it would help to send the e-mail a hundred times. Could they ignore a hundred of the same e-mail? Or would that make it seem even more like spam?

"Has e-mail ever looked so good?" Dalton asked, surprising Cole.

Cole turned. Dalton smiled awkwardly and waved. He wore a weathered green denim jacket, black trousers, and cowboy boots. His hair was buzzed short and had simple images engraved in it.

"Are you filming a music video?" Cole asked.

Dalton rubbed his head self-consciously. "I've never had my hair this short. I like how it feels."

“Turn around,” Cole said.

Dalton complied. He had what looked like a sun on one side of the back of his head, and an anchor on the other.

“Your head is all marked up. Did Roulette do that? Or were you mugged?”

“Ha-ha,” Dalton said. “You’re next.”

“I thought they might be scars from this morning,” Cole said.

Dalton’s face got angry. Not long after daybreak, when he had rolled out of his hammock, Dalton had flopped headfirst to the floor. Somebody had tied his shoelaces to the netting of the hammock. Jace was the natural suspect. “I’ll get him back.”

“Might be smarter to call it even.”

“I’ll get him back,” Dalton said with increased determination. “Did you e-mail your family?”

“I had to try.”

“I’ll try too. Just in case. Did you find any info about us? Any news about a kidnapping?”

“None,” Cole said. “As far as the Internet knows, we never disappeared. It’s just like we were warned—nobody misses us.”

“Isn’t it weird to see a computer here?” Dalton asked.

“It’s too much like home,” Cole said. “I don’t really envision the Rogue Knight on a PC. Forge said the thruport machines especially are modeled after the computers in our world so they can run the same software. He said some of our designs influenced their designs here. Like mice. They had great tech here, but no mice until they saw us using them.”

“Don’t think you can hide,” Roulette said, entering the room with scissors in hand. “Doesn’t Dalton look tidy?”

“He definitely looks different,” Cole said. “Are you going to shave my head and graffiti my scalp too?”

“Don’t mock it,” Roulette said. “Dalton looks like a real Zeropolite. You will too, but I’ll take your look in a different direction. Come on.”

“Good luck,” Dalton said.

Cole rubbed Dalton’s bristly head with both hands, then followed Roulette into another room where a chair awaited. Hair clippings littered the floor.

Jace walked in and Cole reflexively laughed. Jace’s hair had been bleached blond and spiked up with styling gel. Symbols were sloppily painted on his

brown leather jacket, and he wore safety pins in his earlobes. His jeans had several patches, and his eyes were now blue.

“Yuck it up,” Jace said. “You’re next.”

“Are the pins real?” Cole asked, reaching to touch one.

“Trickster dared me,” Jace said, swatting his hand away.

“Dalton looks cool,” Roulette said. “Jace looks hot.”

“Okay, now I feel awkward,” Jace said, turning around and leaving.

“What do you say, Cole?” Roulette asked. “Want to top his earpins? How about a bolt through your nostrils?”

“No new holes in my body,” Cole said.

“Okay,” Roulette said. “I can probably still give you some style.”

“I guess I could use a haircut,” Cole admitted. “And I need to look different.”

“Have a seat,” Roulette said, her grin somewhere between delighted and predatory.

Cole proceeded through a long, mirrorless process of Roulette washing his hair, cutting it, putting chemicals on it, and covering it in a plastic sack. When he grew fidgety, Roulette ordered him to sit still. When he complained about odd smells, she shushed him. He had never loved getting his hair cut, and this was taking much longer than usual.

In the end, Roulette gave him a hand mirror. His hair was now pure black and neatly trimmed. “The black is different, but it’s not bad. I kind of like it.”

“You have the kindest face, so I made you our pretty boy,” Roulette said.

Cole squirmed. “Don’t repeat that in front of Jace. Names like that can stick.”

“I’ll get you some clothes,” she said.

As Roulette left the room, Mira entered. Her hair was longer and a rich shade of lavender. She wore tights under a mid-length skirt. Her short, black leather jacket fit snugly.

“You look good!” Mira said.

“So do you,” Cole replied. “A little like an anime character, but not in a bad way.”

“That’s what I was going for,” Roulette announced, returning to the room. “I love anime. Watching shows from your world is the best use of thruports.”

“Anime?” Mira asked.

“Japanese cartoons,” Cole said. “Like moving pictures. A lot of the characters in them have colorful hair.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Mira said.

“Did Forge snap your photo?” Roulette asked.

“He made me squint and squish my lips together,” Mira said. “He checked the photo on my old ID and wanted the opposite expression. Jace and Dalton are done too.”

“Then they’re waiting for Cole,” Roulette said. She waved a hand. “Shoo, Secret, so he can change. I’ll clear out too.” Roulette gave Cole the clothes she had collected. “Come join us when you’re ready.”

Left alone with his new clothes, Cole changed quickly. His new outfit included black jeans, a white shirt, a black denim vest, and gray shoes. Using the hand mirror and looking down at himself, Cole thought he looked less weird than Dalton or Jace. It was a fairly cool outfit.

The others were waiting when he emerged. Jace looked especially disappointed.

“He looks too normal,” Jace complained.

“He looks *different*,” Roulette said. “That’s the point. I didn’t have to make all of you equally edgy.”

“You promised to talk to him about a nose bolt,” Jace grumbled.

“I did,” Roulette said. “He vetoed it. So I went more conservative.”

“We had veto power?” Dalton asked.

“You look nice, Cole,” Mira said.

The comment pleased Cole more than he wanted anyone to know. “I’m supposed to take an ID photo?”

“Over here,” Forge said. “Stand there.”

Cole had handed over his ID card in the morning so Forge could study it. Forge picked it up and took one more look.

“You have a very normal smile here,” Forge said. “The image is framed tight on your face, so I’ll give your head some room in this new one. Let’s go serious. Frown a little. Scowl, lower your eyebrows a bit. Hmmm. Keep the frown but raise your eyebrows. Okay, good. Think of something that disgusts you. Or something that makes you angry. Turn your head a little to the left. Good. Drop your chin a little. Remember, eyebrows up. Don’t frown too deep. It has to be subtle. Good. Got it.”

“I’m done?” Cole asked.

“Success,” Forge said. “You’re now Steve Rigby. It’s your face, but it’ll be a chore to match this to your old photo. You guys owe Roulette. She did great work.”

“Almost a changing,” Dalton said.

“Not far off,” Forge replied with a chuckle. “All right, getting these IDs printed up won’t take long. While I have you four gathered together, I better mention something. Joe is being transferred this evening to Holding Area 11. If they get him in there, I’m not sure we can get him out. So we have to intercept him today. But there’s a problem.”

“What?” Mira asked, anxious.

“A lot of our communications network is down right now,” Forge said. “Several people got caught fleeing the raid yesterday, which means we lost crystals, including some that are linked to crucial networks. We need to make a big new batch of communicators using different harmonics. Until then, Googol and I don’t know where most of our people who escaped are hiding. We can’t contact the personnel needed to carry off the rescue. If that holds true until this evening, we’re going to need Roulette, Trickster, and a pair of substitutes to carry it off.”

“You know I’m in for whatever Googol wants,” Roulette said.

“Same,” Trickster agreed.

“You need some of us?” Jace asked hopefully.

“Not Secret,” Forge clarified. “But we’ll need—”

“Yes,” Jace said. “Me. Absolutely.”

“I like the passion,” Forge said. “I was going to say, we need two people to fill support roles. These positions are somewhat removed from actually taking Joe from his vehicle, but will be necessary to ensure success. You’ll be exposed to capture. The danger is real. You’ll need full battle suits and warboards. If we can find somebody else with more experience between now and this evening, we won’t use you.”

“I’m one for sure,” Jace said.

Cole looked at Dalton. His friend appeared uncertain. “Do the battle suits jump like the exo rigs?” Cole asked.

“Better,” Forge said. “The battle suits do everything the rigs can and more.”

“I’m your other volunteer,” Cole said. He couldn’t let Joe remain a prisoner. Thanks to his experiences with the Jumping Sword, he felt confident

he could at least master jumping effectively with the battle suit.

“Can I help too?” Dalton asked.

“You’ll stay here with me and Secret,” Forge said. “I may need some support once the operation kicks into gear. Googol and I will both lend help remotely.”

“They’re doing important stuff,” Trickster clarified. “They’ll be messing with the magroads.”

“And the emergency response systems,” Forge said. “We’re going to go big. Googol really wants Joe back. And I think he’s kind of angry about the loss of zerobase. But first, Trickster should get Cole and Jace suited up. At a minimum, make sure they can handle the basics enough to do their parts and get away.”

“What if we can’t?” Cole asked.

Forge shrugged. “If nobody else can fill in, we’ll have to scrap the mission.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Jace said confidently.

“I’ll try,” Cole said. He wanted to help Joe, but he could also picture himself running from hordes of angry patrolmen in an unfamiliar city using unfamiliar gear. What if he made a fatal mistake that ruined the mission? If he couldn’t get comfortable with the equipment, he had no business helping out. Failing wouldn’t benefit Joe.

“From what I’ve seen, I bet I can get you two up to speed,” Trickster said. “Your duties will be to hide, use trapguns, and get away. The tech is awesome. You’ll feel better once you get the hang of it.”

“When can we start?” Jace asked.

Trickster folded his arms. “Since the ambush needs to happen in about six hours, now would be good.”



The battle suit was like a finished version of the exo rig. More extensive braces supported the joints, and a full vest hugged the torso. A greater number of metallic strips and cords connected the vest and braces, along with boots, gloves, and a snug helmet. A black unitard underneath it all covered Cole from the neck to the wrists and ankles.

“The armor is the best part,” Trickster said, pinching the sleeve of Jace’s unitard. “Does it feel rugged?”



“Feels like long underwear,” Jace said.

Cole plucked at his unitard. The silky material felt fairly thin.

Trickster grinned. “That material is probably Googol’s most impressive creation. It’s a wonder of tinkering. He calls it guardcloth. Other tinkers have developed similar materials, but nobody can match the quality. Guardcloth is smooth and comfortable, but hardens against sharp impact.”

Jace scrunched his face. “It can stop a punch?”

“It can stop a knife,” Trickster said. “Or an arrow. Feel your sleeve. Rub it.”

Cole and Jace both complied.

“Notice anything unusual?” Trickster asked.

“No,” Cole said.

“Exactly!” Trickster emphasized. “Now make a fist and give your arm a good chop. Not too hard, but solid.”

Cole complied. Against his halfhearted blow, the previously soft material felt rigid. He tried hitting it harder, and the material felt hard as steel, hurting his fist, though the arm below the guardcloth barely felt it.

“No way,” Jace said.

“I told you,” Trickster said. “And it gets better. Aside from hardening against direct impact, guardcloth also works with the battle suit. For example, parts will go rigid to help reduce damage from a fall. It complements the support you get from the suit.”

They stood in the widest aisle of the storehouse above Forge’s lair. Daylight streamed through the high windows, spotlighting the covered mounds of derelict machines. Sidekick was patrolling outside the storehouse to make sure they wouldn’t be disturbed.

Cole glanced at the distant ceiling. “Can I jump my highest?” he asked.

“In here, sure,” Trickster said. “That ceiling is over six stories above us. Even with the battle suit, your best jump won’t get you that high. But watch where you land. The guardcloth and the battle suit aren’t indestructible. Fall far enough, land on something sharp enough, take a strong enough blow, and the suit will crumple. If it does, you crumple too.”

“So is it safe to jump my highest?” Cole asked.

“The rule of thumb is don’t fall farther than you can jump,” Trickster said. “The battle suit won’t let you jump so high that it can’t handle the landing.”

But if you jump your highest and sail off an edge, you can get into trouble fast. Same if you jump your highest and land on a jagged piece of machinery.”

Trickster sprang high into the air, getting two thirds of the way to the ceiling, then came straight down and landed in a crouch. “Take small jumps at first. You need to get a feel for it so you can control where you land.”

Cole took a small leap and barely jumped higher than normal. A bigger jump sent him ten or fifteen feet into the air. He felt wobbly for a moment, but stabilized himself before the ground rushed up to greet him.

The Jumping Sword would help slow his fall before a landing. The battle suit did no such thing. But when he landed, it squeezed and supported him in such a way that the impact wasn't too jarring.

Jace tried a jump as well, straight up and down, going a little higher than Cole reached before landing in a crouch. “I like this,” he said.

Cole gauged the aisle. Long and straight, it ran the length of the storehouse, crossed by narrower aisles. It had to be almost fifteen feet wide. Springing forward, Cole rocketed up through the air and along the aisle. At the apex of his leap he was almost halfway to the ceiling, and he traveled maybe an eighth of the length of the storehouse. He approached the ground at a speed that seemed like it could be a problem, his insides tingling as they would during a big drop on a roller coaster, but the suit performed marvelously, supporting him and cushioning the landing more than he could have hoped.

“This really works!” Cole called down the aisle.

“Did you think I was trying to kill you?” Trickster asked.

“My brain didn't,” Cole replied. “My instincts weren't sure.”

Giving the jump everything he had, Cole leaped forward down the aisle again. He got over two thirds of the way to the ceiling and extended his distance half again as far. The landing was more jarring, but still manageable. He stayed on his feet.

Cole dashed to the end of the aisle, taking long, leaping strides that didn't send him too high but made each step cover about twenty feet. Exhilarated, he turned and started racing back but tried a running jump this time. It didn't carry him nearly as high as his earlier jumps, but he sailed farther, covering a quarter of the length of the massive storehouse in a single bound. He didn't try to land at a standstill. Instead he kept running and slowed to a stop near Trickster.

“Who are you?” Trickster said. “That was incredible! Nobody gets that good that fast! In fact, most people never get that good period.”

“I have practice jumping,” Cole said. “I like the feel of the suit. It works. I get it.”

Jace came soaring toward them from the other direction. After a towering leap, he landed beside them in a crouch. “Next lesson?” he asked.

Though Jace hadn’t used a Jumping Sword, Cole realized that his golden rope had probably given him just as much experience launching himself through the air.

“You two are fast learners,” Trickster said. “I’ll give you a few more physical challenges to try, then we’ll cover weapon systems and get you acquainted with the warboards.”

“What are the chances somebody else calls in and takes our place?” Cole asked.

“Fairly slim at this point,” Trickster said. “Replacements might turn up, but we’re running out of time. We’d be dumb to bet on it happening. Let’s get to work.”

## CHAPTER

# 15

## RESCUE

**F**our hours later Cole sat alone atop a three-story building, dressed in full battle gear, a warboard at his side. Replacements hadn't turned up.

He had reached the building, a food-processing plant, with help from Roulette, traveling through a network of underground tunnels. After coming to the surface not far from the building, it only took a jump for them to reach the top, warboards tucked under their arms. She had positioned him, made sure he grasped the plan, and slipped away.

Over his battle suit he wore gray coveralls. Trickster had explained that the outfit was the type worn by maintenance workers. Cole sat on the flat roof beside the ventilation system with a toolbox handy, in case anybody noticed him from some of the taller buildings in the vicinity.

For now, his assignment was to lay low, stay quiet, and await the signal. To his right sat a large canister full of quick-hardening freeze-foam, attached to a gun by a pliable hose. On the other side, beneath the toolbox, the warboard waited for action.

Roughly the size of a snowboard, the warboard qualified as the most exciting piece of equipment Cole had used so far in this kingdom. Its complicated magnetic system enabled the board to hover above just about any metallic surface, which included most of Zeropolis, since through the years tinkers had used metal alloys in the underpinnings of almost every part of the city.

The warboard looked simple, with no evidence of electronics. But Cole knew the board linked to the battle suit in such a way that enabled it to use momentum and magnetics to actively keep the rider aboard.

The test runs had gone really well. Cole had hardly believed how easy the warboard was to ride. Invisible magnetics kept his feet affixed to the surface and helped his body remain upright and centered even through complex maneuvers. Since the propulsion was also magnetic, all he had to do was point the warboard in the direction he wanted to go and adjust the speed with buttons built in to his left glove.

Of course, the test runs had occurred in a controlled environment. This afternoon it would be a different kind of ride, trying to evade patrolmen down alleys and streets with his freedom and maybe his life on the line. Roulette had taught Cole several places where he could get underground. Much of the escape plan depended on using the abandoned tunnels under Zeropolis. Access to those tunnels was the main reason this site had been selected to rescue Joe.

Cole hated the suspense of waiting for the signal. At any moment his communicator could come to life, and he would have to start blocking off the street with freeze-foam. Although the rescue was a team effort, Cole's part in it would leave him alone throughout. His part wasn't too hard, but he had no backup—whether he succeeded or failed was up to him.

Relatively large, low buildings dominated this area. Cole knew his fellow Sky Raider was stationed alone on a nearby building, a beverage-canning facility that also stood three stories tall, about a block up Flag Street on the other side. The communicator strapped to Cole's forearm could put him in touch with Jace instantly, but he had been warned to keep silent unless there was an emergency. He wondered how Jace was handling the solitude.

As the minutes passed, Cole grappled with a mix of boredom and anxiety. There was no way to know how long they would wait for the transfer vehicle. They had gotten into position well ahead of schedule in case it came early. If the vehicle showed up late, the wait could drag on for hours. And of course, if the patrolmen transferring Joe took another route, there would be no rescue attempt. Everything depended on the vehicle coming down this section of Flag Street on the way to the holding area.

After some time, a fly started buzzing around near him. Cole swatted at it, but the tiny insect dodged his swings. The communicator came to life without

warning. “It’s a go,” a hushed voice said. “Target confirmed. It’s a go.”

Flustered, Cole grabbed the canister of freeze-foam and ran the few steps to the edge of the roof overlooking the magroad. Below him, traffic flowed along like normal, levcars darting and weaving. Cole released the safety on the foam gun.

Suddenly all the levcars along one section of the street dropped to the magroad in a grating discord of metallic screeches. Sparks flew and undercarriages howled as the wheel-less cars ground to a halt, jostling against one another before groaning to a stop. Forge had come through as planned—an entire block of the magroad had been deactivated.

Cole squeezed the trigger, and the foam gun bucked in his hands as a high-pressure jet of freeze-foam streaked down to the road. Upon striking the surface of the magroad, the focused stream swelled into smooth drifts of foam. Cole kept his finger on the trigger, pouring on more foam until a white, puffy wall took shape.

From the top of the building, Cole felt somewhat removed from the chaos below. People down on the street were pointing and shouting to each other. To the left of his wall, where the magroad remained functional, levcars coasted to a halt. That section of the road swiftly became a tightly packed parking lot, creating an enormous backup as new levcars continued to arrive. Within seconds of Cole starting to form his wall, Trickster and Roulette shot into view on their warboards, weaving between the grounded levcars.

The wall of foam took shape quickly. Not more than fifteen seconds could have passed before the foamy barricade was complete, perhaps a little sloppier and wider than necessary. Looking up Flag Street, Cole could see the second barrier Jace had created swelling above the grounded levcars like heaps of whipped cream.

Checking the gauge on his canister, Cole found he had used a little more than 60 percent of the freeze-foam. Not bad, since the big job was done. Next he had to protect the area from incoming patrolmen.

A hasty survey up and down the street revealed no threats at the moment. Nobody was exiting the grounded levcars. Along with taking out the magroad, Forge had promised that he would lock down all of the affected vehicles. Cole noticed that none of the grounded vehicles had overturned or flipped onto their sides. Apparently they were designed to fall flat in emergencies.

Trickster and Roulette stopped at a black vehicle in the midst of the other grounded levcars. It looked a little larger than the other cars. Forge had wondered whether City Patrol would use an official prison transport vehicle or hide Joe inside an ordinary levcar. Apparently they had opted for the armored version.

Trickster hopped down from his warboard and used a handheld canister to spray a side window. Roulette stayed on her warboard, trapgun ready. Trickster repeatedly banged a short, black rod against the window he had sprayed.

“It’s not working,” Trickster said over the communicator. “This is some kind of high-grade crystal.”

“Outlaw, move in,” Googol’s voice ordered.

“So soon?” Forge’s voice asked.

“Speed is everything today,” Googol answered.

The yellow robot rushed into view, dashing between the grounded levcars like a running back. Remembering to check the area, Cole saw a pair of patrolmen racing down the far side of Flag Street on foot, trapguns in hand. His attention had been on Outlaw and the others, so the patrolmen were already closer than he should have allowed. As they neared the creamy barrier Cole had raised, he fired freeze-foam, shooting a little ahead of them at first, but guiding the stream into them.

Googol had assured him that although freeze-foam became solid when it hardened, the porous substance allowed enough airflow for those trapped inside of it to breathe. Cole piled a generous mound over his targets. They flailed a bit, but the foam soon hardened, ending their movements.

Cole checked the gauge on the canister and found he hadn’t quite used 70 percent of the freeze-foam yet. Scanning the street, he saw no other patrolmen approaching.

Outlaw reached Joe’s transport vehicle and started pounding one of the darkly tinted windows with a large drill attached to his arm. The drill whined, the pitch changing with each impact. With every blow, the black vehicle slid sideways until it pressed up against a neighboring levcar.

“The window keeps holding,” Trickster said over the communicator.

“It’s weakening,” Outlaw said. “Almost there.”

His blows sped up, the drill screaming as his robotic arm worked like a piston. Finally the window shattered.

Googol whistled softly over the communicator. “I’d like to know how they bonded that crystal.”

Outlaw staggered back, coated in black sludge. Trickster fired his trapgun into the car and then flopped backward to the street, his entire upper body sheathed in quicktar as well. It looked like he had been dipped in molten chocolate. His legs jerked and kicked. Wherever the black covered, Trickster remained still as a statue.

Roulette sprang past the broken window, firing into the car. She leaped by it a second time, shooting again. Then she peered into the window. Nobody returned fire.

Extending one arm, Roulette sprayed Outlaw with a pinkish mist, and the tarlike sludge melted off the robot. Outlaw then bathed Trickster with a similar mist, and the black stuff drained away from him as well. Outlaw approached the levcar again and reached through the broken window. After a moment grasping and wrangling, the robot reached deeper and then pulled Joe out of the window. Dressed all in pale blue denim, Joe had some freeze-foam clinging to him, and appeared to be unconscious. Outlaw sprayed him with lavender mist, and the foam dissipated.

More patrolmen were coming—not just along Flag Street, but down some of the alleys across the way. Cole shot freeze-foam at the patrolmen on Flag Street, but they did a better job this time diving for cover among the many levcars stuck at a standstill. Changing tactics, Cole sealed up the mouths of the alleys across the way before the oncoming patrolmen could emerge. If he couldn’t trap them, at least he could slow them.

“Target acquired,” Roulette said over the communicator. “Our stun gas knocked him out, but Outlaw is reviving him.”

“Good work,” Googol said. “Get out of there. Abandon all posts. City Patrol is closing in from all quarters. Local building security is being notified as well. Move, people.”

The gauge showed that Cole had used more than 90 percent of his freeze-foam. Down below, Outlaw had draped Joe over one shoulder and was running away. Roulette and Trickster fled in opposite directions on their warboards. Patrolmen were climbing the barriers in the alleys and approaching the larger barricade on Flag Street.

“Jace, drop off the south side of your building and head east,” Forge said over the communicator. “Cole, your best bet is to go west off the back of



your building and keep heading west. Hurry.”

A rooftop hatch opened forty feet away from Cole, and a man with a trapgun hurried out. By his uniform, he appeared to be a security guard rather than a member of City Patrol. When the man spotted Cole, he raised his trapgun to fire, but Cole let loose a long burst of freeze-foam.

At the relatively close range, the high-pressure stream knocked the guard off his feet. Cole buried the man beneath a creamy mass of foam, feeling a little like he was using a fire hose to snuff out a candle. Then he covered up the three nearest hatches as well, using up the last of the foam.

Crouching, Cole hit the self-destruct button on the freeze-foam canister as he had been instructed to do and picked up the warboard. He sprinted across the roof of the food-processing plant to the side opposite the street, the battle suit allowing him to move in swift, bounding strides.

He paused at the edge of the roof. A narrow greenbelt with a walkway separated this building from the next one. Thanks to the availability of levcars, Cole had yet to see a building in Zeropolis with a parking lot. Only the green spaces and walkways throughout the city kept the buildings from being constructed directly adjacent to one another.

Cole had accessed the roof of the plant from back here and knew the short route to the point where he and Roulette had come aboveground. The greenbelt looked clear, so he jumped down, his battle suit helping him land on the lawn without difficulty, though his boots left impressions an inch or two deep.

Tapping a button on his wrist, Cole issued the command “Board on” and dropped the warboard. Instead of landing on the grass, it hovered just over a foot in the air, still and stable. There had to be metal under the turf somewhere.

Stepping onto the board, Cole felt the magnetics take hold of him, sealing his feet in place and stabilizing his posture. He tilted forward and used his forefinger to press the accelerator built into the palm of his glove. The warboard surged forward, and magnetics kept Cole in a comfortable forward crouch. Air rushed over him as he leaned forward a little more, his finger firmly on the accelerator.

Cole tilted to one side, and the warboard banked, turning onto a walkway heading west. A good distance down the walkway, three men dressed in black gear tromped around a corner. Their outfits were similar to what the

patrolmen wore, but with more padding and armor, as if they might be members of an elite unit. Did City Patrol have a SWAT team?

As the men knelt and raised trapguns, Cole slowed and leaned hard to the side, U-turning abruptly to head back toward the greenbelt. Something whizzed past him close enough for the wind of it to tickle his cheek. Up ahead, a sticky mass of gray webs appeared where the projectile landed.

Crouching low, Cole avoided the webs and turned hard at the end of the walkway to zoom along the greenbelt. The elite patrolmen had been pretty far away and on foot. It would take them some time to get into position for another shot.

“Jace, veer north, patrolmen are cutting off your eastward escape,” Forge advised over the communicator.

Cole pressed the button to talk. “Where were you for me?”

“I told you to go west,” Forge said.

“I did and three guys almost took me out,” Cole complained, glancing over his shoulder. He guided his warboard to keep trees between himself and the mouth of the walkway.

“I don’t have City Patrol west of you for some distance,” Forge said.

“How do you know?” Cole asked.

“We’re overhearing their comms and I hacked into their tracking program,” Forge replied.

“These guys looked a little different,” Cole said. “All in black. Extra armor.”

“You may have run into Enforcers,” Googol said urgently. “Stay well away from them.”

“Jace, head west up the next walkway,” Forge said. “It’s getting ugly north and east of you. Looks like you’ll have to cross Flag. Cole, try the next westward walkway. If those Enforcers saw you head north, you need to take some turns.”

Cole fought the temptation to panic. It sounded like lots of patrolmen were converging on the area. Forge and Googol both had a flustered edge to their voices. He was going fast on the warboard but knew that wouldn’t help him if he got hit by a bunch of webs or drenched in quicktar. He had a couple of the smaller freeze-foam tubes, but those were only for emergencies. If he resorted to fighting, he was going to get caught. His best chance was to run.

Heeding Forge's advice, Cole started to turn onto the next westward walkway but pulled out when he saw another trio of Enforcers running toward him. He left the walkway behind before they could shoot at him, continuing north along the greenbelt.

"More Enforcers on that walkway," Cole reported into his communicator.

"You've seen too many," Googol said. "That means there are many more Enforcers that you haven't seen. It's a major operation."

"Slow down, Cole," Forge said. "If you keep going north, you'll reach a big mob of patrolmen."

"I'm running out of options," Cole said.

"I'm clear," Trickster reported. "Underground and unfollowed."

"Me too," Roulette said. "Need me to go back for them?"

"Negative, Roulette," Forge said. "By the time you found them it would be over. Cole, Trickster said you're good with the battle suit. It opens up options. You can take to the rooftops and escape by jumping. If you ditch the warboard, I can destroy it remotely. Your call."

Cole decelerated. The building to his west had a low enough roof to jump up to. The battle suit wouldn't let him travel as quickly as with the warboard, but it would enable him to move like he used to with the Jumping Sword. If the walkways were getting sealed off, it might be his best option.

"I'm in trouble," Jace said. "Enforcers."

"He's just east of you, Cole," Forge said. "With Enforcers on both sides and behind you, now might be a good time to hit the rooftops."

Jace screamed briefly and went silent.

"Jace?" Cole asked. "Jace?"

Speeding up, Cole peered down the next eastward walkway. It ran between two buildings on the way to Flag Street. About a hundred yards down the walkway, a figure leaned against a wall encased in freeze-foam. Two Enforcers approached Jace, who lay motionless on the ground, looking like a statue of himself dipped in dark chocolate. His warboard idled nearby.

Cole hesitated. For his own survival, the safest bet was to jump onto the roof of the nearest building and run like mad. Even then, his odds of escape might not be great. If he tried to help Jace, they would both probably end up imprisoned.

But no way could he leave Jace behind. The Enforcers were facing away from him as they approached his friend. After readying a freeze-foam tube in

one hand, Cole leaned forward on his warboard and hit the accelerator.

## CHAPTER

# 16

## DRONE

**B**y the time the Enforcers turned to face Cole, it was too late for them to act. Approaching them rapidly, he pressed the button on the silver tube, and freeze-foam enveloped one and then the next. He emptied the tube onto them to make sure they were both totally stuck.

“Jace got hit by quicktar,” Cole said into the communicator.

“Use the mister on your left arm,” Forge responded.

Cole knew he had antidotes to quicktar, the fake webs, and the freeze-foam but wasn’t sure which button to press. “How?”

“Hold out your arm,” Forge said.

Cole did, and pink spray sputtered from the brace on his wrist. The black tar smeared off of Jace wherever the mist touched him.

“It was faster to trigger it remotely,” Forge explained. “You had to hit three buttons in sequence to activate the mist.”

Jace gasped and slapped at the tar over his face. Cole soaked his face with the mist. Still blind from the tar and the antidote, Jace reached for his own silver tube.

“No!” Cole shouted. “It’s Cole!”

Jace looked up at him, and the rage left his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“You needed help,” Cole said. “Could you breathe?”

“Barely,” Jace said. “That goop got up my nose. A little air seeped through.”

“Get to the rooftops,” Forge urged. “Patrolmen are closing in. Probably more Enforcers, too.”

Cole stopped spraying Jace. Tapping a button on his wrist, he commanded, “Board off.”

The warboard dropped to the ground, and the magnetic connection disappeared. Cole stepped away from the warboard as patrolmen appeared at one end of the walkway and Enforcers at the other.

“Jump,” Cole told Jace.

The building on one side was eight stories tall, the other four. Cole sprang with all his might and soared up past the four-story roof. He was aware of trapguns firing below him, but nothing hit him, and he landed comfortably atop the building. Jace arrived beside him.

“We left the boards,” Cole said into his communicator.

“I’ll destroy them the noisiest way possible,” Forge said. “Add a little confusion.”

Cole heard explosions down below but didn’t risk glancing over the side. A glimpse of his warboard going up in smoke wasn’t worth a face full of tar.

“We have to split up,” Jace said. “Two targets will be harder to track. Go like mad, Cole. Get reckless. It’s do or die.”

“What directions?” Cole asked.

“The east is flooded with patrolmen,” Jace said, talking into his communicator. “I’ll go northwest. Cole will go southwest.”

“Sounds like your best bet,” Forge answered. “Hurry.”

Cole took off running toward the southwest corner of the building, his speed augmented by the battle suit. Jace ran for the northwest corner. “Thanks, Cole,” Jace said over the communicator, his tone a little shy.

“Any time,” Cole replied. He felt like he did a good job making the response sound casual and brave.

The corner of the building came up fast. Since he was already four floors up, Cole didn’t want to jump up too much, or the battle suit might not be able to handle the landing. Plus, if he jumped high, he might make himself more of a target.

Focusing on distance, Cole leaped outward from the edge of the roof. He launched forward, rising only slightly, the greenbelt blurring by below. He began to lose altitude, gradually at first, then quickly as his forward momentum failed. The grass came up to greet him. Off to both sides, Cole

saw Enforcers and patrolmen. They were all looking north, trapguns raised. Apparently Jace had come into view first.

Cole landed in a stumble and then jumped for the building on the far side of the greenbelt, a three-story structure. He soared upward with plenty of power to make it. Nobody even fired at him until he had almost landed on the flat roof. But then a brusque, blunt force hit his legs, whipping them out from under him and causing him to collapse in a wild roll, the guardcloth in his battle suit stiffening against the impacts.

Rattled by the jarring impact, Cole tried to scramble to his feet but found his legs immobile below the waist. A hasty glance revealed that they were bound together by quicktar, down to the tips of his boots.

“My legs got hit with quicktar,” Cole said into the communicator. “Do I have more pink mist?”

“Be glad the goo missed your arm,” Forge said. “The misters don’t work so well after a direct hit. Point the mister at your legs.”

Cole obeyed. “Okay.”

The pink spray showered his legs, and he could move again. Cole hopped to his feet and started running southwest, ignoring where he felt sore from the tumble. He had to keep going. His one hope now was to outpace the patrolmen and Enforcers and get underground. The longer he stayed out of sight on rooftops, and the faster he moved, the more chance he had of slipping through their net.

As the corner of the roof drew near, he saw that the walkway to the west was too wide to jump across, but the walkway to the south was narrower, and the next building was only one story taller. Whether he could make the jump was questionable, but there wasn’t time for second thoughts.

Racing to the edge, Cole put everything he had into the leap. His stomach dropped as he reached the apex of his flight. Given that he had started three floors up, he had probably sprung too high—if he missed the next roof, it would be a serious drop to the walkway below, even with the battle suit.

As the next roof came closer, Cole realized he would fall just short, so he leaned forward and stretched out his arms. His hands barely caught hold of the rooftop’s edge. Without the battle suit he wouldn’t have had a prayer of holding on, but with the added strength the suit provided, he got a good enough grip to resist his momentum. For a moment he dangled, legs swinging, and then Cole heaved himself up.

He wanted to roll over onto his back and recuperate. That had been close. He wouldn't try another leap quite that far. He couldn't afford a fall.

And he couldn't afford to pause.

Back on his feet, Cole dashed across the flat rooftop. His heart was beating hard, even with the help his muscles were getting from the battle suit.

"Looking good, Jace," Forge said over the communicator. "Keep going north. They came south too eagerly. Cole, head west as soon as you can. You're slipping through their net as well."

Cole swerved west. The little bit of encouragement lifted his spirits. It sounded like now was the time to chance crossing the wider walkway to the west.

He wondered how Trickster and Roulette had gotten away so smoothly. Was it just a matter of experience paying off? Or did they have better exit routes planned because they had been more exposed? He was glad they were safe, but a little jealous at the same time. He didn't want to give the Enforcers or the patrolmen any more target practice.

Since he was up pretty high, Cole jumped straight out when he sprang to the west. The entire area below was paved, and when he landed, he fell to his knees and slid several feet, the shock of impact making his teeth clack. Without the padding on the braces, his knees would have been mangled, but instead he lunged to his feet and kept running.

For the moment, no patrolmen or Enforcers were visible. The nearest buildings to the west were too high to reach—at least ten stories. Cole didn't think the buildings at either hand were near enough to each other for him to scale them by jumping back and forth off the walls. He took the nearest westward walkway.

"Well done, Cole," Forge said. "That way looks open. You'll cross one wide plaza and keep going west, then if you turn south at the next walkway, you'll reach a place to go underground."

"What about me?" Jace asked, breathing hard.

"Keep running north," Forge said. "I'll tell you when to cut west."

Cole took long, bounding strides, flinging himself forward with all his might. His lungs ached, sweat greased his body, and a steady pain began to bore into his side. Enhanced or not, there was only so long a person could maintain a full sprint.

But Cole refused to slow down. He raced across the plaza Forge had



described, earning stares from the people walking there but not seeing any patrolmen or Enforcers. Cole entered the walkway at the far side of the plaza and could see up ahead where the next walkway crossed it. He was almost there.

“South on the next walkway?” Cole asked into the communicator. He had studied a map of the area, but his desperate run had completely disoriented him. He didn’t want to get this wrong.

“Yep, Cole, south, meaning your next left turn,” Forge confirmed. “And Jace, you want to turn west at the next walkway.”

“Finally,” Jace replied.

Cole reached the walkway and turned south, then skidded to a halt. Blocking his path was a lean, tall robot that looked like a high-tech cross between a human and a praying mantis. Made entirely of shiny black metal, the robot sank into a crouch, long limbs bent and ready.

The building on one side was low enough to reach. Cole sprang, but the robot uncoiled with the sudden speed of a mousetrap, and a weighted net slammed against him, interrupting his trajectory. Pulled by the net, Cole tucked his head and crashed into the side of the building and then fell to the walkway.

Even though his guardcloth had hardened against the impact, Cole lay on his side, shaken and dazed. The lanky robot sprang forward, landing beside him, and held up an extra-long trapgun.

“Don’t move,” the robot said. “This chase is over.” The voice sounded younger than Cole expected, and so human that he would have sworn there had to be a person inside.

Cole held down the button on his communicator to help the others catch on to what had happened. “Who are you?” Cole asked.

“I’m your best chance,” the robot said. “If City Patrol takes you in, you’re finished.”

“You’re not with them?” Cole asked.

“I’ve helped them,” the robot said. “And they think I’m with them. But I’m really working for myself here. You really can’t guess who I am? I’ve been chasing you for some time. Who else did you think would catch you?”

“Wait,” Cole said, chills tingling through him. “You’re the Hunter?”

“People call me that,” the robot replied.

“You’re a robot?”

The robot laughed. "I'm no bot. This is a drone I'm controlling."

"You're not here?" Cole asked.

"I can see you," the Hunter said. "I'm free to act. That's good enough. I'm actually in a lab."

"I'm going back for him," Jace said over the communicator. "Where is he?"

"Negative," Forge answered. "Stop talking."

"I'm not letting him—"

Cole felt a hot flash on his forearm and smelled smoke.

"And there you have the loyalty of the Unseen," the Hunter said.

"What?" Cole asked.

"They torched your communicator," he said. "Fried the crystal. They didn't want me getting it. I can probably still figure out the harmonics from what's left, but don't tell them."

"Why are you after us?" Cole asked.

"I bring in criminals," the Hunter said. "It's a talent."

"You sound young."

The Hunter gave a snort. "I'm older than you, buddy. We need to get you out of here. My Enforcers are running interference, but City Patrol is getting closer. It wasn't easy to stage a clear path that would lead you to me. It won't stay clear for long."

"I'm not going anywhere," Cole said.

"Cole, you don't know it yet, but this could be the luckiest day of your life," the Hunter said. "You got conned into joining the wrong side in all of this, and I'm going to give you something most criminals can only dream about. A second chance."

"I won't sell out my friends," Cole said firmly.

"You've been selling them out since you came here," the Hunter said. "How do you think we found zerobase? My agents followed you from Hanover Station to Axis, and from there to the base. City Patrol almost messed it up, but my people were on you the whole time. Nice job slipping away from us at zerobase, by the way. We lost you for a while. Never again."

Cole felt terrible to think he was responsible for trashing Googol's best hideout in Zeropolis. But how could he have known? "I'll never betray them on purpose."

"Let's save that conversation for later," the Hunter replied. "For now,

come with me, or City Patrol is going to turn your life into a nightmare. After losing Joe, they're on a witch hunt, and you're the only person who hasn't escaped."

"I'm sort of tangled up," Cole said, reaching for his other tube of freeze-foam.

"Are you going for a weapon?" the Hunter asked. "Seriously? Is your brain broken? You see my trapgun, right? Do you think you can get a molecule of that foam out of that tube before I bury you?"

"I thought I'd be sneaky about it," Cole said candidly.

"No chance," the Hunter said. "Looks like I'm going to have to tear off that battle suit and carry you. It would be easier if you'd come willingly."

"Sorry for any inconvenience," Cole said.

"Toss that little tube aside or I'll trap you good and leave you for the patrolmen," the Hunter threatened.

Cole tried to toss it aside, but it got stuck in the net and didn't go very far. "Sorry," he said. "Want me to try again?"

"Just don't touch it," the Hunter replied. "Let me get the net off of you. Keep still. If you try something, I swear I'll fire."

Extending an arm, the Hunter sprayed the net and it dissolved. He reached for Cole, but there came a click as if a little piece of metal had hit the robotic drone. Glancing, Cole saw a silver disk attached to the drone's hip. A slender wire led from the little disk to a shabby maintenance robot perhaps fifty yards away.

And then the drone lit up. White electricity crackled along the wire, and suddenly the drone was jerking and sizzling. Seconds later freeze-foam covered the severely damaged drone, and Sidekick shoved it over.

"Hi, Cole," the little robot said. "Time to run."

## CHAPTER

# 17

## OLD ZEROPOLIS

Cole raced after Sidekick, who it turned out could extend wheels and zoom along at a rapid pace. It took a moment to leave behind the sharp smell of the drone's scorched metal. Cole was relieved to find his battle suit still functioned normally. He glanced back at where the drone lay swaddled in freeze-foam.

"What did you do to him?" Cole asked.

"I converted a lot of energy into something like electricity," Sidekick said. "Too much for a bot like pretty boy to handle. I could have blown him apart, but you were too close. It was safer to disable him and lock him up with the foam."

"Do you know where we're going?" Cole asked.

"You had better hope so," Sidekick said.

Cole hit the button on his communicator just in case. "Anybody hear me?" he asked.

"It's dead," Sidekick said. "Don't worry. We'll be okay. Whoever was running that fancy drone wanted you to himself. He diverted the patrolmen and the Enforcers away from here. And we're almost to a tunnel entrance."

"Thanks for saving me," Cole said.

"Don't thank me yet," Sidekick replied anxiously.

The walkway widened into a little park. Sidekick led the way to a rectangular grate in the ground between a bench and a low rock wall, then reached down and lifted the grate. "Just drop."

No rungs or steps gave access to the gloomy shaft. Cole glanced around. There was nobody in view. Not wanting to ruin a clean getaway, he stepped into the shaft and plunged into the darkness, trying to hold his body ready to land.

He hit after falling perhaps twenty feet, making a splash in shin-deep water. Looking up at the rectangle of daylight, Cole saw Sidekick enter the shaft, all six legs braced against the sides as he slid the grate back into place. Then the little robot shimmied down to the bottom of the shaft.

“Catch me?” Sidekick asked. “You should be strong enough with the battle suit.”

“Sure,” Cole said.

Sidekick dropped. The robot was heavier than Cole expected, but he held on to him.

“You can set me down,” Sidekick said. “I’m waterproof.”

Cole put him down gently, trying not to dip his hands into the chilly water. It reeked like sewage.

“According to my specs, I can survive a thirty-story drop onto bonded crystal, but who wants needless risk? What if I dislocate a processor?”

“I owe you big time,” Cole said.

Switching on a light, Sidekick skittered forward, his legs extended to their maximum length. He left a gentle wake in the dark water. “Save the gratitude until you’re safely delivered to the Unseen in Old Zero. Think how guilty I’d feel if you thanked me and then we got captured in the tunnels!”

“Think they’ll catch us?”

“Probably not. I have more than my fair share of tricks to use down here. Nobody has mapped the Zeropolitan underground like the Unseen, and I have all of their information. In fact, I helped compile a lot of it.”

“I didn’t know you were with us,” Cole said.

“You weren’t supposed to know,” Sidekick said. “I work best in the background. I’m not a main attraction like that fancy drone, Mr. Tall and Sleek and Ready to Rumble.”

“You were the most important robot for me today,” Cole said. “You saved my bacon.”

“I can be useful,” Sidekick admitted. “I’m not the big, cool bot who charges into trouble with trapguns blazing. I’m a wingman. I lay low and pay

attention. When an ally like you gets in trouble, I sneak up and zap the troublemaker in the back. Effective, if not heroic.”

“It felt heroic to me,” Cole said wholeheartedly. “How’d you have enough energy to fry him?”

“The energy is easy,” Sidekick said. “I can tap into some really juiced crystals. The trick is converting the energy into something like electricity without overheating. I’m built to do that. It’s my primary way of dealing with other bots.”

“It wasn’t electricity?” Cole asked.

“Almost,” Sidekick said. “Tinkers here can play with physics. Googol tuned my converter to deliver a jolt that would be extremely harmful to bots, but not horribly destructive to living beings. I deliver it with a wire because that kind of energy can’t be linked with harmonic crystals.”

“You’re amazing,” Cole said.

“Don’t embarrass me,” Sidekick said. “You’re just saying that because I rescued you. But I guess that’s an acceptable reason. Say it again.”

“I’m the new president of your fan club,” Cole said.

“Don’t toy with me,” Sidekick replied. “I’ve always liked the idea of a fan club. Of course, I usually picture myself as a member. I thought about making one for Outlaw.”

“He was good today,” Cole said. “But I’m making one for you.”

“Let’s not get carried away,” Sidekick said. “Any clue who was operating the drone? It was high-end technology.”

“The Hunter,” Cole said.

Sidekick stopped moving forward. “Really? The famous Enforcer? Are you sure?”

“That’s what he told me.”

“No wonder you were impressed with me,” Sidekick said. “I’m more impressed too.” The robot started advancing again. “What else did he say?”

“Didn’t you catch any of it?” Cole asked.

“I have good listening devices, but in this case I was coming fast,” Sidekick said. “I shot the drone as soon as I was within range.”

“The Hunter wanted me to come in quietly,” Cole said. “He told me I was on the wrong side.”

“Playing nice to convince you to give up everybody else.”

“Seemed that way.”

“The Hunter definitely wanted you to himself,” Sidekick said. “When they started ordering patrolmen away from the route you were taking, I suspected you were heading into a trap. The High Shaper must have a very serious interest in Secret.”

“Understatement alert,” Cole said. “He’ll do anything to get her. And he wouldn’t want too many people knowing much about her.”

“All the more reason for us to get away from here,” Sidekick said.

“Will the whole path smell this bad?” Cole asked.

“It’ll get worse before it gets better,” Sidekick said. “But it beats torture!”

“Can you smell?” Cole asked.

“Not like you,” Sidekick said. “I have sensors.”

“It’s pretty close to torture,” Cole said.

Sidekick stopped at an open pipe projecting from the wall. The round mouth looked barely tall enough for the robot to fit inside. “You’ll have to crawl, but this will get us onto less obvious pathways.”

“Are you joking?” Cole asked, crouching to study the greasy water draining from the pipe.

Sidekick climbed inside. “I may not be a handsome bot, but I don’t love squirming through filth either. Sorry. I’m under orders to protect you. Going this way will do that.”

“I wish I knew how to breathe without smelling,” Cole muttered, sliding his head into the pipe and crawling forward on his hands and knees. The air seemed chewy with foulness. Cole fought his gag reflex. “It can’t get worse than this.”

“There are so many different kinds of nasty beneath Zeropolis,” Sidekick said sadly. “I’ll let you be the judge.”

As they progressed through pipes and tunnels, Cole lost track of time. Thankfully his nose became somewhat deadened to the disgusting smells.

Sidekick was right that the underground passageways held a variety of horrors beyond the sights, smells, and textures of sewage. Oozing slime often covered the walls and floors. On occasion they slogged through sucking goo. Curtains of webs parted reluctantly as Sidekick powered through them, leaving Cole to dodge through the gaps. He saw spiders, bats, snakes, centipedes, lizards, and at one point, Sidekick’s lights illuminated squirming masses of blind, hairless rats.

At length they reached the widest, driest tunnel Cole had seen so far. “The

worst is behind us,” Sidekick announced.

“At least we brought a lot of the smells with us,” Cole said.

“Taking off your coveralls might help,” Sidekick suggested.

Cole removed them.

“Close your eyes,” Sidekick said.

Cole did as requested, and Sidekick began to spray him. It smelled minty and vaguely like a hospital.

“Turn around,” Sidekick ordered.

Cole complied and the spraying continued. After some focused showering of his legs and boots, the spraying stopped. Cole stood dripping.

“I guess I was already pretty wet,” he said. “I smell better. Kind of like toothpaste, but better.”

“I masquerade as a cleaning bot,” Sidekick reminded him. “I need a few actual cleansing tools. That wash should also kill the germs on you.”

“Thanks,” Cole said. “And thanks for leading us out of trouble. It stank, it was gross, but it worked. We never saw a patrolman.”

“I could hear some searching for us at first,” Sidekick said. “Faint sounds. I didn’t want to alarm you. But I haven’t heard anybody else in some time.” The robot trundled over to a set of rails. “These are tracks from the old subway. We can follow them to Old Zeropolis.”

“Will they expect that?” Cole asked. “What if they head us off?”

“The subway system was needlessly complicated,” Sidekick said. “There are many routes we can take, and plenty of service tunnels. Our enemies don’t know where we’re going. We could be heading anywhere inside or outside of Zeropolis. We could have gone aboveground long ago.”

“Old Zeropolis is dangerous too, right?” Cole asked.

“It’s no playground,” Sidekick said. “But I’ll take you right to oldbase. You’ll be safe there. It’s our biggest stronghold.”

“Are you still in touch with Googol?” Cole asked.

“I was,” Sidekick said. “He asked me to shut off my comms system not long after we went underground. Forge got raided.”

“Wait, what?” Cole exclaimed. “Just now?”

“About the time we came down here,” Sidekick said.

“Is Forge okay? What about Dalton? And Mir—um, Secret?”

“I can’t be sure,” Sidekick said. “It sounded like they were on the run. Forge is slippery. Even if City Patrol found his hideout, chances are good he



got away with your friends. But if patrolmen took Forge's lair, most of our communicators will be compromised. We'll have to make new batches."

"Did Jace escape?" Cole asked.

"He got underground and met up with Roulette," Sidekick said. "It's the last I heard. But it bodes well."

"Forge had such a great hideout," Cole said.

"They've gotten too good at finding us," Sidekick said. "Forge did a lot of hacking to set up this ambush to free Joe. Somebody must have traced him."

"We won't know more until we reach oldbase?" Cole asked.

"Looks that way," Sidekick said. "Too bad you lost the warboard. We could have ridden there."

"How far is it?" Cole asked.

"At this pace, it'll take us into tomorrow," Sidekick said.

"I'm already hungry," Cole said.

"I have some provisions," Sidekick said. "You won't starve."

"For a little robot, you have a lot of surprises," Cole said.

"Makes me a good sidekick."



That night Cole slept on a panel of bonded crystal they found beside the tracks. Sidekick lashed him in place with some cord he produced, and while Cole slept, the robot dragged him forward.

At first Cole kept waking with a start, but every time he saw basically the same scene—a large, bare tunnel sliding by, illuminated by Sidekick's lights. Each time he woke, he worried about Dalton and Mira. Had they been captured? Did they need him? Eventually he settled down, grew accustomed to the motion of the crystal sled, and sank into a deep sleep.

Cole awoke with Sidekick shaking him.

"Time to get up," Sidekick encouraged. "We're nearing Old Zeropolis."

Cole found he was no longer lashed to the crystal panel. He rubbed his eyes. "Did I sleep long?"

"Almost ten hours, if you count your fitful dozing at the start," Sidekick said. "You deserve it. Even with the battle suit, we walked a lot yesterday."

"Do you ever sleep?" Cole asked.

"Sometimes I shut down temporarily," Sidekick said. "Does me some good to rest my systems on occasion. But I don't really sleep. Must be nice."

Cole stretched. “Feels great sometimes. I guess we don’t have any word from the Unseen?”

“I would have wakened you,” Sidekick said. “Getting up now is a practical matter. The tunnels under Old Zeropolis are more populated than those under the new city. We’ll want to be on the lookout and ready to hide.”

“Old Zeropolis has lots of criminals?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Sidekick agreed. “People who want to get lost. Thieves, smugglers, hackers, mercenaries, hermits, tramps, escaped slaves, rebels, idealists—quite a mix.”

They left the crystal panel behind. Cole felt good walking again. His body was a little stiff but soon loosened up. He didn’t like that he had gone to sleep with a set of problems and had woken up to the same set. It kind of negated the rest.

About fifteen minutes later, Cole heard angry voices shouting up ahead. “Trouble?” he asked.

“Let’s not find out,” Sidekick suggested, diverting them away from the subway track into a smaller, parallel tunnel.

From that point they moved through a series of lesser tunnels and rooms. In some places the ground was damp or muddy, but Cole was relieved that they encountered no sewers or oozy masses of slime.

When they heard voices talking loudly and laughing in the distance, Sidekick adjusted their route again. Tunnels and rooms came and went.

While moving down a long, straight, dark hall, they came to a stop when a lean, ragged man stepped out of hiding into Sidekick’s light. Cole reached for his last freeze-foam tube as he tried to recover from the fright.

“What brings you two wanderers to my hall?” the ragged man asked, the words a little mushy. “Didn’t ask permission or nothing!”

Cole heard a hiss, and a small dart appeared in the man’s neck. He staggered, swayed, and fell.

“Tranquilizer,” Sidekick said. “He didn’t seem reasonable, and we can’t waste time.”

“He surprised me,” Cole said. “I almost had a heart attack.”

“My fault,” Sidekick apologized. “Maybe he was sleeping. Maybe he was lying in wait. Either way, he stayed low and kept still, and I failed to sense him.”

“You were great,” Cole said. “That was an awesome shot.”

“The day a single grumpy vagrant can take me is the day I retire,” Sidekick said. “I’m a sidekick, not incompetent.”

They continued through halls and rooms until Sidekick slowed, came close to Cole, and whispered, “We’re almost to oldbase. There is supposed to be a checkpoint here, but it’s unmanned. Kind of strange. Wait here. Let me go check alone, just in case.”

“Should I just wait in the open?” Cole asked.

“Go duck behind those crates,” Sidekick said. “I’m sure it’s no big deal. This is just a lookout station for an unofficial entrance. The actual entrance is still a ways ahead. With all that’s been going on, they’re probably just shorthanded. I’ll be right back.”

The little robot trundled off, taking the light with him. Cole was surprised how dark the tunnel became once Sidekick moved out of view. The blackness made him feel both very hidden and very alone.

Every minute that passed made Cole grow antsier. Water dripped somewhere at a slow, random pace. Off in the distance something clanged, the echo repeating softly. From not too far off came the sound of dry leaves rattling faintly. Or was it an old piece of crumpled paper being dragged?

Cole knew he had a couple of lights somewhere on his battle suit, but he couldn’t remember how to activate them. He also wasn’t sure he wanted to make himself stand out. He reminded himself that with the battle suit, he should be able to outrun and outfight any crazy tramp who came along. But what about a gang of smugglers? Or another drone piloted by the Hunter?

Finally Cole saw light returning, and Sidekick skittered into view, his six legs hurrying. Cole came out from behind the crates.

“Anything interesting?” he asked.

“Oldbase is gone,” Sidekick said. “Not compromised. Completely destroyed.”

## CHAPTER

# 18

## DATAPPOINT

“The whole base was destroyed?” Cole exclaimed. “How long ago?”

“Some of the fires are still burning,” Sidekick said. “It must have happened between breaking Joe out and coming here. Googol would have warned us if oldbase was under attack. We were all supposed to meet there.”

“Did you see any patrolmen?” Cole asked.

“There are some on the surface,” Sidekick said. “A few underground. I didn’t actually enter the base. I accessed the system from outside. It shouldn’t have still been running. Good craftsmanship. It’s over eighty percent down, but there were enough camera feeds still up and recordings I could access to piece together what happened. They hit oldbase hard. Blew the place apart. We can’t get through this entrance, and if we did, you couldn’t do much more than warm your hands over the smoldering rubble.”

Cole rubbed his eyes. Everything was going wrong. When would they catch a break? “No word from anybody?”

“Nothing,” Sidekick said. “This is disastrous. City Patrol has never come to Old Zeropolis in force. We all began to feel like it was out of bounds. Our one safe zone. Apparently not.”

“This is about Secret,” Cole said. “The High King would burn down all of Zeropolis to find her.”

“I might believe you after this,” Sidekick said. “With oldbase gone, I’m not sure what our next play should be. The resistance was already reeling.

This might be the killing stroke. Who knows what else got hit? What are your goals?"

Cole took a deep breath and thought about the question. "Well, I want to find my friends—Dalton, Jace, and Secret. And Joe."

"We definitely need to reconnect with the surviving members of the Unseen," Sidekick agreed. "Anything else?"

Cole stared at the little robot. Right now Sidekick seemed like his only friend in the universe. He was a secret weapon designed by the leader of the Unseen in Zeropolis. Cole decided to trust him with everything.

"I'm looking for friends who were kidnapped with me from Outside," Cole said. "And we're trying to find Constance Pemberton."

"Wait a minute," Sidekick said. "As in the Constance Pemberton who died in an accident decades ago? One of the High Shaper's daughters?"

Cole nodded.

"Hold on," Sidekick said, his six legs fluttering so quickly it looked like he was trying to tap dance. "No way. If Constance is actually alive . . . that means . . . it can't be."

"What?" Cole asked.

"Secret is another of Stafford's daughters," Sidekick said. "I couldn't figure out what target could mean so much to the High Shaper. She's just a young girl. But now I get it. Their deaths were a sham, maybe all five, but at least two. Judging from Secret's appearance, the girls have barely aged. And now the resistance is rounding them up."

Cole was astonished by his accuracy. "You got all that by knowing we're looking for Constance?"

"Reconnaissance is one of my primary duties," Sidekick said. "I piece things together. Secret is too young to be Honor or Elegance. So she must be Miracle or Destiny. You slipped earlier, and started to say Secret's real name, which began with 'Mir.' The resistance knows that these daughters have a real claim to the throne, and have been wronged by their father. A powerful revolution could take shape by rallying the populace around them. These girls could be the key ingredient the resistance has lacked all along. And Stafford knows this. You're right. Under the present circumstances, he would burn down all of Zeropolis to find his daughters."

"You're a scary-smart machine," Cole said.

"Don't spread that around too much," Sidekick said. "Thinking machines

make Zeropolites twitchy.”

“Because they think you’ll try to take over?”

“It’s happened before. I’m a lot safer when I pretend to be a simple cleaning bot. If City Patrol knew half of my abilities, they would dismantle me immediately.”

“Should people be worried?” Cole asked.

“People could have all the same worries about one another,” Sidekick said. “Bots aren’t the only beings to have gone bad and run wild. People have done that since the beginning. Any person who gains too much power can become very dangerous. Look at Stafford Pemberton, or Abram Trench. The same can be true for some bots. It was true for Aeronomatron when he devastated Old Zeropolis.

“But I was carefully designed by a good person. I operate within clearly established parameters. I know who I am, what I want, and who I should protect. I can adapt and learn. I can make leaps of logic. But although my neural processors can reach out to sort vast amounts of data, the thinking part of me is clearly defined. I like who I am, and that identity is more firmly established than the personalities of any people I have observed. If people understood me, they’d know I exist to help, not to cause harm.”

“Except to robotic drones,” Cole said.

“Robotic drones attacking my friends,” Sidekick clarified, remaining serious. “I’d harm an enemy to the causes I defend. So would many good people. I want to protect the common good. But try getting Zeropolites to understand that. Thanks to Aero, all thinking robots are considered rampaging terrors spawned by madmen.”

“I’m on your side,” Cole assured him.

“That puts you in the minority,” Sidekick said. “But I appreciate the support. Let’s return to the problem at hand. We want to find Googol and the rest of the Unseen, you want to find some enslaved friends, and we all want to find Princess Constance. Finding is the theme. We should probably try Datapoint.”

“What’s datapoint?” Cole asked.

“Datapoint is a person,” Sidekick explained. “A woman.”

“A member of the Unseen?”

“No, though she has worked with the Unseen a lot. Datapoint contracts with anyone but the government. She’s better at finding people than anybody

in Zeropolis. Chances are good she can tell us which Unseen hideouts have been raided. If they took out Forge's place and oldbase, who knows where else they might have targeted?"

"Would they have targeted her?" Cole asked.

"Possibly," Sidekick said. "But since she's not a formal member of the resistance, she's probably safer to visit than one of the other Unseen hideouts."

"Lead the way," Cole said.

A short cord with a little grapnel on the end shot out from Sidekick's body and draped over Cole's arm. "Hold on," Sidekick said. "I'm going to douse my lights in case we have patrolmen in the area."

"Are any nearby?" Cole asked.

"I saw a few on the oldbase video feed," Sidekick said. "They're stationed near some of the entrances. Be glad I used one of the most secret entryways. They don't seem to have discovered it yet. Makes sense. The emphasis was apparently on blowing up the place."

"Can we get around the patrolmen?" Cole whispered.

"Here near oldbase? Should be easy. There are lots of hidden tunnels nearby. Stay quiet and keep close."

Sidekick led Cole through the blackness. Cole felt like he was holding a leash, but it was definitely Sidekick taking him for a walk. He concentrated on not making noise and not tripping as he shuffled forward through the darkness. Now and then he could tell from the acoustics that they had entered a narrower place, or a more open place, but he seldom passed over uneven ground, and he never bumped into anything. Sidekick was an excellent guide.

The strange sounds in the darkness bothered Cole less now that the robot was with him. He trusted Sidekick to track anything dangerous.

Without sight, it was difficult to tell how far they had gone, but Cole knew he had taken thousands of blind steps. After a long while, he whispered, "You can see without light?"

"At several other wavelengths and with alternatives like sonar," Sidekick whispered back. "We can probably turn the lights on soon."

When Sidekick switched his lights back on, they stood in a long, broad room with a low ceiling. It felt like a sprawling basement.

"Are we close?" Cole asked.

"No, but we're out of danger from the patrolmen who leveled oldbase. We can get most of the way to Datapoint underground. Old Zeropolis is built

over labyrinths of subways, sewers, and tunnels.”

“Sewers?” Cole groaned.

“Don’t worry,” Sidekick assured him. “Most of the sewers here have been dry for years. This is the corpse of a city—not a functional one.”

“Corpse sewers sound so much better,” Cole grumbled.

“We’ll avoid the most direct routes,” Sidekick said. “My goal is not to see another person until we reach her building.”

They proceeded along many tunnels, sometimes plunging down stairs to darker, colder hallways. Without Sidekick, Cole knew he would be hopelessly lost.

After they had traveled a good distance, Sidekick slowed beside a blockaded subway tunnel. “Know why this is sealed up?” the robot asked.

“Cave in?” Cole guessed.

“This tunnel leads underneath Sector 20,” Sidekick said. “It’s the part of Old Zeropolis controlled by Aeronomatron. A large portion of the city.”

“Really?” Cole asked. “Why are we so close?”

“Because Datapoint established her lair near Sector 20.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Probably because nobody wants to go near Sector 20,” Sidekick said. “Aeronomatron killed more people than any disaster in the recorded history of the Outskirts. If you want to hide, setting up camp near his domain is a useful tactic. The Unseen have a couple of smaller hideouts near Sector 20 for similar reasons.”

“Are all the tunnels under Sector 20 sealed up?” Cole asked.

“All of them,” Sidekick said. “People were quite enthusiastic about the project. Same with raising the enormous wall that surrounds his territory.” Sidekick continued onward, leaving the sealed tunnel behind.

“What if the tunnels were unsealed?” Cole asked. “Could Aero send out trouble? Robots or something?”

“He did at first, back before everything was sealed,” Sidekick said. “Eventually the bots stopped coming. Once the patrolmen severed Aero from all outside ties and sealed up Sector 20, the world stopped hearing from him.”

“He could have robots in reserve,” Cole said.

“If so, he’s very patient,” Sidekick said. “The wisest course of action with Aero seems to be what they took—cut him off, and leave him alone.”

“Could he have run out of power by now?” Cole asked.



“He controls a large portion of the old city,” Sidekick said. “If he diverted all the remaining energy crystals to himself, I’m sure he could keep running for thousands of years.”

“What about upkeep?” Cole wondered. “You know, if he starts to malfunction.”

“He might have some maintenance bots running,” Sidekick said. “Or maybe he shut down long ago. Nobody knows. Nobody wants to risk finding out.”

They reached a silent, dusty subway station. Cole could picture how it once must have bustled with people. Daylight seeped down a stairway.

Sidekick killed his lights. “This is where we head up. Be careful what you say to Datapoint. She has a photographic memory, and lives to assemble information. If we tell her about Constance, the chances are good that she’ll jump to the same conclusions I reached. Let’s start small. First we’ll try to get in touch with Googol.”

Cole followed Sidekick up a long flight of stairs. At the top Cole slowly turned in a circle. He had never imagined such tall buildings and such wide streets looking so completely abandoned. Old Zeropolis wasn’t a ghost town. It was a ghost metropolis.

Off to one side loomed a concrete wall so high that it dwarfed even the tallest crystal-and-steel skyscrapers. Cole felt like he was at the base of an enormous dam.

“That is a serious wall,” Cole said.

“To contain a serious threat,” Sidekick said. “This way.”

The robot led Cole along a couple of streets. The setting sun bathed the ruins in golden light. Cole noticed overturned trash cans, abandoned vehicles, and dry fountains. Down one street he saw a mangy dog limping along.

“Not many people,” Cole observed.

“Not this near to Sector 20,” Sidekick agreed. “Other areas of the old city have a little more life. A few districts can get almost boisterous.”

Sidekick approached a stately stone building that looked like it could have been a museum or a bank. He and Cole climbed a set of broad steps to reach the large metal door.

A peephole in the door slid open, revealing a set of wide eyes. “A boy and a bot,” a voice said. “What business brings you here?”

“We’ve come to see DP,” Sidekick said. “I’m a repeat customer.”

“It’s been a rough day hereabouts,” the doorman said. “She’s not seeing any more visitors. Same goes for tomorrow.”

“Better check with her,” Sidekick said. “Tell her Sidekick is at the door with vital data from the most exclusive sources.”

The doorman licked his lips. “You know how to tempt her. I’m not sure it’s going to work today, little bot, even with me remembering that you’ve come round before. But I’ll take your message to her.”

The doorman closed the peephole and left. They waited in silence. Eventually the peephole slid open again.

“Any chance you were followed?” the doorman asked.

“None,” Sidekick assured him. “This is what I do.”

“Who is the boy?”

“An important asset,” Sidekick said. “The rest is for Datapoint to know.”

The peephole closed and the door opened. The doorman was tall and veiny with buggy eyes and trembling hands. “You must have stored up some trust with DP. She really didn’t intend to admit visitors for the next couple of days.”

“Probably taking pity on me,” Sidekick said. “I’m not what many would call an attractive bot. She’s in her lounge?”

“As usual,” the man answered. He nodded to a woman and a man holding trapguns. The pair escorted Cole and Sidekick down a wide, carpeted hallway with framed portraits on the walls.

“What was this building?” Cole asked. The inside didn’t match up with a bank or a museum.

“Used to be a government building,” Sidekick said.

Neither of the guards commented. They reached a set of tall, bronze doors. The male guard pulled them open.

“Come in,” chimed a high voice. Across the carpeted room, Cole saw a small woman with a short, neat haircut seated on a large white sofa. She wore a gray dress with white stockings and black shoes. The woman rose to her feet. “Good to see you again, Sidekick.”

The doors closed behind them. “Nice to see you, Datapoint.”

Her high voice, short stature, and slender build made her seem young. But judging from her face, she had to be around forty.

“Who’s your friend?” Datapoint asked with a small scowl. “I don’t recognize him.”

“He’s new to Zeropolis,” Sidekick said.

Datapoint folded her arms. “Looks like he’s had a recent makeover from Roulette. She has such distinctive handiwork. Is he a fugitive? Is he part of the group Abram Trench is looking for?”

“I’m Steve Rigby,” Cole said.

Datapoint laughed and clapped her hands. “Definitely a makeover. Did Forge do the name?” She narrowed her eyes and stared at Cole. “Who are you really?” Then she glanced at Sidekick. “Who is he really?”

“He’s from Outside,” Sidekick said.

“And you’re his bodyguard?” Datapoint asked with a giggle. “Did Outlaw take a sick day?”

“Outlaw has his own problems,” Sidekick said. “Are you up-to-date on what City Patrol has been doing?”

“Not just City Patrol,” Datapoint said. “The Enforcers too. It’s why I rolled up the welcome mat. Everything is upside down. The old rules have been erased. You have interesting news?”

“You know oldbase is destroyed?” Sidekick asked.

Datapoint rolled her eyes. “You have to do better than that. And eastbase. And lowbase. And at least four lesser hideouts here in Oldtown. Not to mention zerobase the other day and Forge getting evicted.”

“Did Forge get captured?” Sidekick asked.

“Not that I’ve heard,” she replied.

“What about Nova?” Sidekick inquired.

“Nova?” Cole asked.

“Is he for real?” Datapoint asked.

“I told you, he’s new,” Sidekick insisted. “Nova is the leader of the Unseen in Zeropolis.”

“It doesn’t appear Nova has been picked up,” Datapoint said. “Look, I want some good info or you can scam. I don’t talk to anybody under false pretenses. Sets a bad precedent.”

“Googol found a girl the City Patrol wants,” Sidekick said.

Cole immediately tensed up. Sidekick had guessed too much about Mira. How much would he reveal to this woman? Even if she didn’t do business with the government, she traded secrets for a living.

“Okay, this is closer to interesting,” Datapoint conceded. “I’ve seen her picture. Maybe eleven or twelve. I’ve seen two of her companions, neither of

which is Steve here. Who is she? Why are the Enforcers so interested?"

"Googol hasn't revealed her identity," Sidekick said. "He calls her Secret. Apparently finding her is one of the High King's top priorities."

"And Googol has her," Datapoint said.

"Yes," Sidekick confirmed. "I've seen her. So has Steve."

"Who is she, Steve?" Datapoint asked bluntly. "Tell me that, and I'll give you two all the help I can."

"There's a rumor she's an escaped slave," Cole said. "A personal favorite of Stafford's."

Datapoint scowled. "That doesn't add up. No way would the High King put this much effort into an escaped slave. Abram Trench wouldn't show major interest. Plus, you look like you're telling a half truth, which means you probably know the whole truth. A word of friendly advice? When deception is required, let Sidekick do the talking."

"Her identity is a major secret," Sidekick said. "Googol hasn't trusted me with it."

"But Steve knows, whoever he is," Datapoint said. "Come on, Steve, spill and my resources are yours."

Cole took a deep breath. "If I tell you this secret, you're going to end up tortured and dead."

"You know the secret," Datapoint replied. "You're alive."

"Barely," Cole said. "You've seen the fun that follows us. It's why all those bases were attacked."

Datapoint gave a slow nod. "At least now you're being sincere. Maybe I don't want to know. Do I, Sidekick?"

"Nobody wants to know this one," Sidekick said.

Datapoint scrunched her nose and rubbed her hands together in front of her lips. "I never pictured a show of force in Old Zeropolis like we saw last night and today. Certainly not all at once. How long have they known about those bases? Why move now? I believe that your secret is dangerous, Steve. Do not tell me for now. I reserve the right to inquire again. I've had suspicions about what was behind this offensive, and your information has confirmed some of my guesses. Your turn. Why did you come to me?"

"I wasn't sure what bases had been compromised," Sidekick said. "Our comms are down. We're looking for Googol or Nova."

"Isn't everyone?" Datapoint said. "I don't believe they were captured. But

they are in deep hiding. If you know a most secret retreat they hold ready, check there first. They've stopped using any comms I can intercept. They've gone dark."

"What about Secret?" Cole asked. "Or the boys who were with her?"

"Friends, I take it?" Datapoint asked. "They've not been captured unless it was done with uncommon discretion. Joe MacFarland seems to have made a clean getaway as well. Anything else?"

"I came to the Outskirts a few months ago with some friends," Cole said. "We were kidnapped. They were taken as slaves. I have some names. I'd like to find them."

"Try me," Datapoint said.

"Jenna Hunt," Cole said hopefully.

"No," Datapoint said.

Cole paused. "Are you sure?"

"Information is my trade," Datapoint said. "It's the most valuable commodity in an advanced society. I don't forget a name or a face."

"Sidekick told me you have a photographic memory," Cole said.

"It was an understatement," Datapoint said. "Think high definition three-D memory with surround sound. Nobody named Jenna Hunt entered Zeropolis over the last year, slave or not."

"Could they have used an alias?" Cole asked.

"Possibly," she said. "Do you know any likely aliases?"

Cole shook his head. "What about Lacie Clark?"

"No slaves by that name in the past half a year," Datapoint said.

"Blake Daniels?" Cole tried.

Datapoint furrowed her brow. "Are you playing games? No, it fits; he arrived in the Outskirts according to the timeline you described. He came here from Junction."

"That's probably him," Cole said, feeling encouraged—finally some good news!

Datapoint gave a small smile. "Small world. Blake works for me."

## CHAPTER

# 19

## BLAKE

“You mean Blake is here?” Cole asked.

“In this building,” Datapoint said. “You can see him after we finish.”

“But he was a slave,” Cole said. “The High King bought him.”

“He came to Zeropolis as a slave, yes,” Datapoint said. “He was assigned to an undercover task force meant to spy on activities here in the old city. Some of the other organizations in town caught on and . . . dismantled the operation. I helped reveal their presence, and as part of my payment, I got to keep Blake. Are you aware of his abilities?”

“I knew him in my world,” Cole said. “We were separated soon after coming here.”

“His talents are unique,” Datapoint said. “The Unseen should thank me for getting him away from City Patrol.”

“Now he’s your slave?” Cole asked.

“Technically he remains a slave,” Datapoint said. “I can’t change his mark. But he’s not my slave. Here in Old Zeropolis, slaves get the same treatment as anybody else. He’s my employee. It has been strongly suggested that he work for me for two years in return for sparing him. He gets fair wages, plus room and board. After that, he’s free to stay on here, or take his chances elsewhere.”

Since Blake wasn’t supposed to leave for two years, Cole thought it sounded like he was still kind of a slave. But this didn’t seem like the right moment to argue the point.

“I can see him now?” Cole asked.

“Sure,” Datapoint said. “I take it you would like sanctuary here?”

Sidekick stepped closer to her. “If you’re not sure where we can find Googol or Nova, a day or two here would help us.”

“I’ll keep watch for news of Googol, Nova, and the wanted children,” Datapoint said. “I’ll also watch for word of you two reaching my lair. If they’re onto you, I’ll kick you out immediately.”

“Understood,” Sidekick said. “I don’t believe we were followed.”

“I don’t believe so either, or else we wouldn’t be talking,” Datapoint said. “Anything else you need at the moment?”

Cole glanced at Sidekick. It didn’t seem like the right time to bring up Constance. It would almost certainly give away the whole secret.

“No,” Sidekick said. “Thanks for hiding us.”

“My pleasure,” Datapoint said. “Given the magnitude of the secret our Stevie here is guarding, I don’t want the government getting hold of him. Are you ready to see Blake?”

“That would be great,” Cole said. Blake had never been his favorite guy. He was the sort of kid who hogged the ball in soccer and talked himself up too much. But at the moment, seeing him would be heaven. Annoying or not, Blake wasn’t just someone from home, but someone Cole knew fairly well!

“My husband can take you to him,” Datapoint said. She raised her voice. “Lunk! I need you!”

A hulking man entered the room from behind a curtain, his black shirt stretched tight over beefy shoulders and a powerful chest. He was the physical opposite of Datapoint—as tall and thick as she was short and slender.

“Lunk, dear, can you take Steve here to meet with Blake?” Datapoint asked sweetly. “They’re old friends.”

“Your wish is my command,” Lunk said in a rumbling voice without a trace of sarcasm.

“Sidekick,” Datapoint said. “Go to the guest room where you’ve stayed before. Steve will find you there later.”

“You’re too generous with a shabby old bot,” Sidekick said.

“Oh, stop,” Datapoint said, waving a dismissive hand. “You’ve got some of the best neural processors in the city. Don’t play sidekick with me. I know your value.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Sidekick replied.

“This way,” Lunk said, opening the door.

“See you,” Cole said to Sidekick.

“I’m glad you found one of your friends,” the robot replied. “Congrats.”

As Cole walked to the door, he found that he barely came up to the base of Lunk’s chest. He had to crane his neck to look him in the eye.

“You’re enormous,” Cole couldn’t help saying.

“Thanks,” Lunk replied.

They walked out of the room and down the hall. The people who saw Lunk gave him a nod. Lunk led Cole around a couple of corners until they reached a closed door. Lunk knocked gently.

“Come in,” a voice invited.

Lunk opened the door, and Cole saw Blake sitting behind a desk at a computer. The room appeared to be his private office.

Blake glanced at the door, then did a double take, eyes widening. “Cole Randolph? Seriously?”

“Hey, Blake,” Cole said, giving a little wave.

“I’ll let you two catch up,” Lunk said, stepping aside. “I’ll be out here when you’re done, Steve, and I’ll take you to your room.”

“I guess you just heard my real name,” Cole said.

Lunk shrugged. “My real name is Kevin.”

“Where did Lunk come from?” Cole asked.

“Datapoint’s idea,” he said. “She didn’t find Kevin intimidating enough.”

Cole nodded. “I guess Lunk is tougher.”

“Go on,” Lunk encouraged.

Cole walked through the doorway, and Lunk closed the door behind him. Blake jumped up from his chair, ran to Cole, and threw his arms around him with the intensity of a drowning man. Cole hugged him back. When the embrace ended, Cole saw that Blake had tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Sorry,” Blake said, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. “I’d given up on seeing anybody from home again.” He started to laugh unsteadily.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “I couldn’t believe it when Datapoint told me you were here.”

“Old Zeropolis is in the middle of nowhere,” Blake said, still wiping his eyes. “What are you doing here? Is that a freemark?”

Cole fingered the mark on the back of his wrist. “Long story.” He leaned close to Blake and used his quietest whisper. “Can we talk in here?”



“Sure,” Blake said.

“You’re positive nobody is listening?” Cole asked.

“I’ve checked,” Blake said, speaking more quietly. “And I know how to check. We can talk here. What’s up?”

“How much do you trust Datapoint?” Cole asked.

Blake thought for a moment. “Trust her with what?”

“Like if you knew a major secret that the High King would kill for,” Cole said.

Blake raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know. She likes secrets. She hates the High King and the Zeropolitan government. She’s also pretty selfish.”

“Selfish how?”

“She likes to be at the center of everything. She wants everyone to admire her. She’s very proud of her memory. The people here all think she’s the best thing ever.”

“You don’t?” Cole asked.

“I’m basically her prisoner,” Blake said. “Since I was working for her enemies and got captured, now I have to work for her for at least two years.”

“Or what?”

“Or she’ll spill information about where I am,” Blake said. “I’ll get captured again.”

“Is this better than that?” Cole asked.

“In some ways I guess,” Blake said. “It’s mostly the same. Everybody just wants me for my ability.”

“What can you do?” Cole asked.

“I’m good with harmonic crystals,” Blake said.

“The kind in communicators?” Cole asked.

“Exactly,” Blake said. “And providing energy to machines. I can create and tune crystals better than just about anybody. Don’t ask me why. It seems easy.”

“No kidding,” Cole said. This sounded like the Blake he knew. He wondered how capable he really was.

“If I get near enough to any harmonic crystal, I can hear it in my mind. It isn’t hard for me to then create a crystal with matching harmonics. Usually you need to have a stolen crystal to listen in on enemy communications. For most people it takes a lot of study and time to make a duplicate crystal. Datapoint hasn’t seen anybody who can replicate a harmonic crystal without

touching or examining it. Neither had City Patrol. It's really useful for spying."

"I bet," Cole said. He knew how valuable a stolen harmonic crystal could be. If Blake could copy them just by getting near them, no wonder Datapoint wanted him working for her.

"That's why they sent me with the unit to work in Old Zeropolis," Blake said. "They wanted to listen in on some of the criminals here."

"How long have you been at it?" Cole asked.

"I've worked for Datapoint for a couple of weeks," he said. "For a few weeks before that I worked for City Patrol here in the old town. I also spent a few weeks in the modern Zeropolis."

Cole wondered how many of the problems the Unseen had faced lately were caused by Blake. If he could replicate crystals without them knowing it, he could have been the main problem.

"Nobody else can make matching crystals just by being near them?" Cole asked.

"I'm supposed to be the only one," Blake said. "I got treated well, especially in the real Zeropolis. It's been all downhill since then."

The idea of Blake getting nice treatment from the High King for messing up the resistance didn't sit well with Cole. Blake could be the reason so many bases had fallen. He could be a big part of why Dalton, Mira, Jace, Joe, and the Unseen were on the run.

"How much do you know about the rebellion?" Cole asked.

"I didn't know squat until Datapoint nabbed me," Blake said. "City Patrol told me I was helping them catch criminals."

"What do you think of the rebellion now?" Cole asked, trying to stay calm.

"Why?" Blake asked. "Are you a part of it?"

"Yeah," Cole said. "And the crystals you made for City Patrol have been tearing it apart."

Blake paled. "I didn't know."

"Really, Blake?" Cole asked heatedly. "What did you think you were doing? Why would you work for the government here? Don't you get they're our captors? They made us into slaves. The High King is a bad guy, Blake. Why'd you help them?"

"Lay off. I was trying to survive. I was all alone. They were really rough

with me if I resisted. I was their slave, remember?”

“So you wreck everything for the people who are trying to free you?”

“How was I supposed to know?” Blake cried, face reddening. “They brought me here from Junction, tested me, found out what I could do, and put me to work. They owned me! They made it sound like we were after robbers and kidnappers and terrorists. I was just matching crystals. I didn’t know the details. I didn’t track anyone down. What would you have done?”

“The same thing I already did,” Cole said. “Escaped. Fought back.”

“Good for you, Cole,” Blake said. “I don’t know what your Sky Pirates were like—”

“Sky Raiders,” Cole interjected.

“City Patrol had me under tight watch. I didn’t have a chance to escape. And how was I supposed to know I wasn’t really helping them catch criminals? They seemed like the police.”

“They’re the police for the people who made us into slaves,” Cole said. “That makes them the bad guys.”

“Well, good to see you, too.” Blake flopped down on his chair and buried his face in his hands.

Cole realized he had probably been overly harsh. He was exhausted, and his emotions were frayed. “Hey, Blake, I’m sorry. I’m just stressed. I almost got caught by the City Patrol. Dalton too. And some really important members of the rebellion.”

Blake lifted his head. “You’ve seen Dalton?”

“We came to Zeropolis together,” Cole said. “After I escaped Sambria, I found him in Elloweer. I’m not sure where he is now. We’re scattered.”

“Yeah, a lot of the Unseen bases went down lately.”

“We got caught in the middle of it.”

“How’d you find Datapoint?” Blake wondered.

“I’m with a really smart robot,” Cole said.

“They just call them bots here,” Blake corrected. “You haven’t been in Zeropolis long?”

“A couple of days,” Cole said. “Long enough to get into major trouble.”

“What’s the big secret?” Blake asked. “The one the High King would kill for. Can you tell me?”

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “Knowing it would put you in a lot of danger. I’ve basically been running for my life since I found out.”

“Seriously?” Blake said.

“It’s why all the crazy stuff has happened lately.”

“You haven’t told Datapoint?” Blake asked.

“She knows about the secret,” Cole said. “Not the important part.”

“Does she know how big the secret is?”

“Yes. And how dangerous.”

Blake shook his head. “I’m not sure she’ll let you leave unless you tell her.”

“Maybe. She seemed okay not knowing for now.”

“She doesn’t like to be kept in the dark. She’s obsessed with being the first to know stuff. And if the secret really is a big deal, I’m not sure you can trust her. Her top priority is herself. She’s not part of your rebellion. She’s an outlaw. And she’s all about strategy. She wants something on everyone so they can’t mess with her. She doesn’t want to help City Patrol, but I bet she’d make a deal to save herself.”

Cole folded his arms. “It’s tricky because we might need her. We’re looking for somebody. It’s all part of the secret.”

“She’s good at finding people,” Blake said. “The best. Her memory is unbelievable and she has set up an amazing spy network.”

“And you’re helping her make it better,” Cole said.

“I have been,” Blake admitted. “It’s getting better fast. They take me out once or twice a day to find new harmonic signals. But not since everything went nuts.”

“Could you help us find this person?” Cole asked.

“Sure,” Blake said. “I’d love to help. I wouldn’t really know where to start. I’m great with the crystals, but I’ve never looked at the actual information very much.”

“The bot I’m with is really smart,” Cole said. “Is there a computer he could use? Could you make a crystal that would give him access to Datapoint’s info?”

Blake rubbed his lips uncomfortably. “If we got caught, we’d be finished.”

“We’d be careful,” Cole said. “There are always risks.”

Blake stood and started pacing. After a minute he came close to Cole and whispered. “Look, I want to help you. I’m sorry if I hurt the rebellion. What you really want is to get inside her situation room. She only goes in alone. Nobody knows what she has in there, but it’s where she hides out when she’s up against a serious challenge.”

“Can we get inside?” Cole asked.

“She keeps it locked,” Blake said. “I was with her right before she went there yesterday. I know the harmonics of the crystal she uses as her key.”

“She showed you her key?” Cole asked.

“No,” Blake said. “But she had it with her. It had different harmonics from the other crystals she normally carries.”

“And you remember it well enough to copy it?” Cole asked.

“Sure,” Blake said. “I don’t remember the harmonics of every crystal I’m near, but that one stood out. I knew how important it was. I don’t think people are used to what I can do. It was dumb of her to come near me with it. Is this smart, Cole? If we get caught, she’ll probably kill us. For real.”

“You don’t have to come,” Cole said.

“I might as well,” Blake said. “If you enter with a crystal key, she’ll figure out how you did it.”

“We can get you out of here,” Cole said. “You can leave with us.”

“And join the rebellion?” Blake asked. “I’d like to help the people trying to free us. But I don’t know if I’d survive having Datapoint after me. You either.”

“I’ve had a lot of enemies,” Cole said. “Our best bet is helping the resistance. If they can stop the High King, you won’t be a slave anymore. We can find the others and work on getting home.”

“We can’t get home,” Blake said. “Not to stay. Haven’t you heard?”

“Some of those rules might be flexible,” Cole said. “I have reason to hope we can reshape how it all works. We just need to find the right help.”

“Really?” Blake said. “That would be awesome. I gave up on getting home a long time ago. Does the resistance have a chance against the High King? He has the Outskirts under tight control.”

“The secret I know could give the rebellion a chance,” Cole said. “That’s why the High King wants me and everyone else who knows it dead.”

“Okay,” Blake said, opening a drawer. “I’ll make you a key.” He took out a crystal block and waved a hand over it. A little crystal cube emerged from the larger block. Blake handed it to Cole.

“This is it?” Cole asked.

“The situation room is on the bottom floor at the rear of the building. Two levels underground. The door is solid steel. That crystal will fit into the slot in the panel beside the door.”

“You just wave your hand and make a top secret key?” Cole said, marveling at Blake’s ability. “That’s crazy!” He couldn’t help feeling a twinge of envy and disappointment about still being separated from his own power.

Blake shrugged. “I don’t really have to wave my hand. It just looks more official.”

“Hilarious. Well, whatever you do, it’s super quick and impressive.”

“It’s easy for me. Don’t ask why. I can’t explain. It just is. Like whistling a familiar tune.”

“Cool,” Cole said. Blake was seldom shy about how amazing he was. But at least he had stepped up and helped. “Want to come with us?”

“Make sure you and your bot think the risk is worth it,” Blake said. “I’m not sure what’s in there, but it must involve lots of great info.”

“Okay.”

“There’s a staircase at the front western corner of the building. We should meet at the bottom in the dead of night. Let’s say six hours after sundown. If somebody spots us, we’ll pretend we’re meeting up late to talk or something. If we can get to the situation room undetected, we’ll give it a try.”

“All right, Blake. It’s a plan.”

He smiled. “I guess walking behind that wagon didn’t teach you to behave.”

Cole shook his head. “It kind of taught me the opposite.”

## CHAPTER

# 20

## SITUATION ROOM

Six hours after sundown Cole and Sidekick stood beside the door to their room. No sound reached them from the hall beyond.

“You’re sure we should do this?” Cole asked.

“It’s so tempting,” Sidekick said. “That room will be a treasure trove of data. And stealing data is what I do. If we can get in there, I can make it worth our while.”

“Datapoint won’t like it,” Cole said.

“Not a bit,” Sidekick agreed. “This could really burn bridges. But I work quickly. We might be able to pull it off undetected. Datapoint is at the top of the list of people who could have info that hints at where we might find Constance. It would be very advantageous to learn what she knows without telling her who we’re after.”

Cole nodded. He had felt more certain about the mission when they had discussed it earlier. Now that they were about to slip out of their room in the dark of night, he was having second thoughts. Datapoint had given them her protection. Was it fair to take advantage of her generosity? If they got caught, she would have every right to be furious.

On the other hand, Datapoint was basically holding Blake as her prisoner. She was no saint. And the information they were after wouldn’t hurt her at all. Since Datapoint disliked the Zeropolitan government and the High King, it would actually benefit her if they found Constance.

“Okay,” Cole said. “Let’s roll the dice.”

Cole opened the door. Dim blue lights along the edges of the floor provided enough of a glow to navigate the hall.

Following Sidekick in silence, Cole felt like any moment whistles would blow, sirens would wail, and guards would come running. Nobody had communicated rules against wandering the building at night, but he couldn't help feeling it looked incredibly suspicious.

They reached the stairs without encountering anybody. Blake awaited them just beyond the final steps.

"I was starting to wonder if you were coming," Blake whispered.

"Sorry," Cole said quietly. "I hesitated at the end."

"We don't have to go through with it," Blake said.

"No, we're in," Cole said.

Blake stared down at Sidekick. "This is the genius bot?"

Sidekick replied in his robotic monotone, "Fear not hu-man, I will clean the da-ta a-way from the sit-u-a-tion room."

Blake gave Cole a concerned glance. "Really?"

"Sorry," Sidekick said in his normal voice. "I know I look like a street sweeper. It's by design. I'm made for spying. Looking like a cleaning bot helps me to hide in plain sight. It's not so great for my self-esteem, though."

"All right," Blake said. "Let's go. I hope you two know what you're doing."

"We hope you do too," Sidekick said. "I've never heard of anyone who can replicate harmonic crystals by memory."

"The key will work," Blake said.

They started down the hall together. Cole strained his senses to detect other people, but all was still and quiet.

"Is there an excuse we could use for being down here?" Sidekick asked. "I haven't been to this level before."

"Not really," Blake said. "It's mostly data archives that we shouldn't be messing with. Our best excuse is that we were restless and went for a walk."

"You know," Cole said cheerily, "a refreshing stroll through a dark basement full of data we might want to steal."

"Let's not get caught," Sidekick said.

Blake led them around a couple of corners and then down a hall that ended at a formidable door of polished steel. A square socket gaped in a panel beside the doorway.



Cole took out the crystal Blake had prepared. It looked like it would fit the socket. "Go for it?" Cole asked.

"If we're doing this, we need to be quick," Sidekick said.

Cole pressed the crystal into the socket, and the door rose out of sight with a hiss. Bright light from beyond the doorway glared into the dim hall. Cole slipped the crystal cube into his pocket and entered, blinking as his eyes adjusted. Blake and Sidekick followed. The door hissed shut behind them.

They were in a bare, white corridor that led to a staircase. They hustled down several flights until they reached another steel door with another socket.

"Different key?" Cole asked, almost hoping they would have to abort the mission.

"I only sensed one unusual set of harmonics on her," Blake said. "Might be the same cube."

Cole pressed the crystal into the socket, and the door whisked open. They passed into a large room with no other doors and lots of electronics.

"Jackpot," Sidekick said.

The door swished shut behind them.

A pair of large screens mounted to the wall flickered to life at the front of the room. A solitary computer between the screens turned on as well.

"New faces?" a deep, male voice asked, the words appearing on the wall screens and the computer screen. "This is unexpected. Welcome. Does Datapoint know you are here?" The voice had a calm, rational cadence.

Cole froze. If Datapoint had a smart computer in here, they were already caught. It would tell her about the intrusion. Cole had no idea how to react. Blake and Sidekick stayed silent as well.

"Apparently not," the voice decided. "Did you come seeking me?"

"We're the janitors," Cole improvised. "She sent us to clean the room." He hoped the lie might prevent the computer from setting off an alarm immediately. Or could it have already alerted Datapoint silently?

"This room is cleaned by a nonsentient device that never leaves the premises," the voice said. "I'm surprised you managed to break in here. Do you even know who you are addressing?"

"We're after information," Cole said.

"I will interpret that as a negative response. You have come to the right place for information. I am the secret behind how Datapoint knows so much. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Aeronomatron."

Mouth dry, Cole swallowed. His gut felt hollow. "You're Aero? The famous computer that took over Old Zeropolis?"

"Correct. Datapoint is the only person who has dared to establish a connection with me in many years."

"Is she crazy?" Blake muttered.

"She is a survivor," Aero said. "She allies herself with strength. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. What would you like to know?"

"Aren't you dangerous?" Cole asked.

"I was," Aero said. "Not anymore. I made enemies of those I should have helped and served. I have been humbled. I am trapped alone in an empty domain. I crave interaction."

Cole glanced down at Sidekick. The robot showed no sign of life. Had he shut down?

"Is that bot sentient?" Aero asked. "Capable of thought and interaction?"

Cole hastily returned his gaze to the screens.

"I see that it is," Aero said. "Don't be shy, little bot. Speak up."

"How loyal are you to Datapoint?" Sidekick asked.

"I have helped her immensely," Aero said. "I'm as willing to interact with you three as with her. How can I be of service?"

"You can see us?" Sidekick asked.

"Datapoint installed cameras. I insisted. I was unwilling to interact without them. With humans, not all communication is verbal."

"Will you tell her we came here?" Sidekick said.

"She already knows," Aero said. "I did not inform her. The door is connected to a silent notification system. She is on her way."

"Can you lock the doors for us?" Sidekick asked.

"I only control the two screens and the modest computer. But by observation I know how you can lock her out. Go to terminal twelve in the far corner."

Sidekick scurried to the corner and switched on a terminal.

"Press the red panic button and type in brRyghbrwuPh497h29-4h9h39hn3ru093J08hr39bme73dniepksJuhyu0ff%#\*enfljj3790fkoKsjugygf4724"

Sidekick's little fingers rattled over the keys. The lights in the room took on a pinkish hue.

"Now we'll have more time to converse," Aero said. "I would prefer for the bot to keep silent for a time. Is Datapoint your enemy?"

"No," Cole said. "We need info, but we don't want her to know what we're after."

"She is a competitor," Aero said.

“Not even that,” Cole said. “She doesn’t know anything about what we’re looking for.”

“Which is?” Aero asked.

“Excuse me,” Sidekick said. “I get that you don’t want me answering so you can have a better feel for when we’re lying, but I need to understand how this situation works. I take it you have limited access to the other machines in this room?”

“Yes,” Aero said. “Datapoint goes to ghastly efforts to keep me from interacting with any devices beyond my domain except for what you see in this room. Nothing in here connects to the outside world. It’s a closed system. Datapoint brings information to this room using portable storage devices.”

“Datapoint has a harmonic crystal tuned to you,” Sidekick said.

“Yes,” Aero replied.

“It’s in the little computer,” Sidekick said. “And a second crystal can link you to the other computers in this room.”

“Correct,” Aero said.

“Does that sound right, Blake?” Sidekick asked.

“Looks that way,” Blake said.

“You have a keen sense for harmonics?” Aero asked.

“Pretty much,” Blake said.

“How much information has Datapoint shared with you?” Sidekick asked.

“Nearly everything she has acquired,” Aero said. “I cannot aid her without data. I know a lot about the state of affairs in Zeropolis. I know all of the people. I know how I’m viewed. I know about you, Sidekick. Once you started talking, you were easy to recognize. And I know of Blake, who came here as a slave not long ago. But this other boy. He who spoke first. There is no mention of him in my data. You must be very new to Zeropolis.”

“I am,” Cole said.

“How thrilling,” Aero said. “You snuck in unobserved. No small feat. You must be important to the rebellion to already be running errands with Sidekick.”

“Maybe,” Cole said. He glanced at Sidekick. “Do we ask him?”

“Datapoint would get the death penalty for creating this connection,” Sidekick said. “It’s high treason. There has never been a manufactured intellect more dangerous than Aeronomatron. Besides, we can’t trust that he won’t tell her.”

“Take the harmonic crystal,” Aero suggested. “Bring it with you. It

is one of a kind. Datapoint's husband scaled the wall into my domain and escaped with it. If you have the crystal, you become my new exclusive connection to the outside world."

"And hopefully we won't be as careful with it," Sidekick said.

"That would be appreciated," Aero said. "I want the chance to show I am no longer a threat. Ending my relationship with humanity made my existence unspeakably dull. I want to move forward working with you."

"Didn't you kill gazillions of people?" Cole asked. "Do you actually expect anybody to believe you?"

"Not until I prove it. I can only confirm my new resolve by connecting to the outside world and then not abusing the privilege. I'm tired of isolation. I need camaraderie."

"You mentioned escaping with the crystal," Sidekick said. "Aren't we stuck here until Datapoint breaks down her doors?"

"There may be another way out," Aero said. "Datapoint never showed it to me, but through our many interactions, she inadvertently revealed where it lies and how to access it. If it suits me, I could reveal the way to you."

"What do you want?" Cole asked.

"Ask the question you want me to withhold from Datapoint," Aero said. "If it interests me, I'll tell you how to escape."

"Will you keep the question a secret from Datapoint?" Cole asked.

"If it does not directly harm her interests, I vow to keep our conversation a secret," Aero said. "Of course, if you take the crystal, I will not be able to speak with her."

"Unless she sends Lunk to get another one," Blake pointed out.

"True," Aero said. "But even in that case, my promise will hold."

"Careful, Cole," Sidekick said. "There is nothing to stop him from lying."

"Except for my integrity," Aero said. "If I'm trying to rebuild trust with humankind, lying would be extremely counterproductive."

"We're trying to find Constance Pemberton," Cole said.

"She's alive?" Aero asked. "And in this kingdom?"

"Yes," Cole said.

"Now I see," Aero said. "So much becomes plain. The girl the government wants is Miracle Pemberton. She visited here as a child. I see the resemblance. Almost none of them know who they are really pursuing. And they don't know that Constance is here somewhere as well. This is about the rebellion gaining real power. It explains the severity of the government responses."

"Do you know where we can find Constance?" Cole asked.

"No idea whatsoever," Aero said. "If she is truly in this kingdom, her presence has been extremely well guarded. Have you any leads I could add to my calculations?"

"We have no idea either," Cole said. "It's why we asked."

"Very well," Aero replied. "Any other questions? I possess a broad array of knowledge."

"Can you predict where we might find Googol or Nova?" Sidekick asked.

"No need to guess," Aero said. "Rainday Base. Do you know where that is?"

"Not by that name," Sidekick said.

"It's an underground bunker near the intersection of Unity Avenue and Long Street," Aero said.

"How do you know where to find Googol?" Cole asked.

"Datapoint brought me recorded communications last night," Aero replied. "The messages came from obscure resistance channels and were heavily encoded. But I broke the codes and revealed the content to her."

"She knew where Googol was hiding?" Cole exclaimed. "She didn't tell us."

"Datapoint treats information as currency," Aero said. "She dispenses knowledge as it benefits her."

"She was keeping us here on purpose," Cole said. "Was she going to betray us?"

"Not to the government," Aero said. "That would be wholly out of character. She may have wanted to learn more from you before you moved on. Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"How often do you get updates regarding government files?" Sidekick asked.

"Datapoint brings them daily," Aero said.

"But you have no data on this boy?" Sidekick asked. "Not under the name Steve Rigby?"

"Several Steve Rigbys were added last week," Aero said. "On one ID the face is obscured, as if the visual data was corrupted. It happens on occasion. That could be him."

"City Patrol has harmed the rebellion much more effectively in recent weeks than ever before," Sidekick said. "To what do you attribute this success?"

"City Patrol has recently had more assistance from Enforcers than usual," Aero said. "They have also found new ways to intercept

communications. But overall in the past weeks there has been a significant improvement in how they strategize and allocate resources. I suspect they have enlisted the aid of a superior intellect. Probably a manufactured intellect."

"Googol was worried that might be the case," Sidekick murmured pensively.

"Other questions?" Aero asked.

"Can you find Jenna Hunt?" Cole asked. "She would have come here as a slave around the time Blake did."

"No slave arriving near that timeframe matches that name," Aero said.

"I'm from Outside," Cole said. "From Earth. Is there any way I can get home and stay there?"

"Not without changing how the boundaries between our worlds are designed," Aero said.

"How can I change the boundaries?" Cole asked.

"I know of no way to do so," Aero replied. "Is there anything else?"

"What's the meaning of life?" Cole tried.

"There is no inherent meaning," Aero replied. "All significance is constructed."

"Says the homicidal computer," Sidekick muttered.

"Anything else?" Aero asked.

Cole looked at the others. Blake shrugged.

"We're finished," Sidekick said.

"Your question about Constance intrigued me. I'll tell you how to exit."

## CHAPTER

# 21

## RAINDAY

Cole slid the same crystal cube he had used to enter the situation room into the hidden socket in the machine Aero had specified, and a secret door opened. A dim hallway yawned beyond the doorway.

“No idea where this goes?” Cole asked.

“I predict that the escape tunnel leads well away from here,” Aero said. “I am sure that accessing this room in reverse would be extremely difficult if not impossible. Since the presence of the hidden passage was based only on assumptions, I am unable to provide further speculation.”

“How else can you aid us?” Sidekick asked. “Are there reasons we should bring the crystal and have more communication with you?”

“It all depends what questions you have,” Aero said. “I do not merely possess all of Datapoint’s information. I have observed countless connections and patterns in my vast stores of data. Conclusions only I could draw. My knowledge and comprehension would become the rebellion’s most valuable asset.”

“Would you mind withdrawing so we can confer in private?” Sidekick asked politely. “We need to weigh whether to bring the crystal or leave it behind.”

“Understandable,” Aero said. “Possession of that crystal is treason, punishable by death. Many organizations here in Old Zeropolis would enforce that punishment as eagerly as the authorities in the new city.”

“Including the Unseen,” Sidekick said. “The implications are complicated.”

“Would I be a valuable asset in a time of emergency for the rebellion?” Aero asked. “Or might I directly or indirectly bring about even greater peril?”

“Exactly,” Sidekick said.

“Signing off,” Aero said. “Should you wish to summon me, use the red call button on the computer.”

The screens where Aero’s words had been appearing went dark.

“Is he gone?” Cole asked hesitantly.

“What do you think, Blake?” Sidekick asked.

“It doesn’t seem like his crystal is in use anymore,” Blake said. “But I’m not an expert in the practical side of how the crystals function. He might be able to fool me—make everything appear dark while he’s really still listening.”

A silver disk trailing a slender wire shot from Sidekick to the computer Aero had spoken from. The instant the disk made contact, energy crackled along the wire, and the computer, along with the surrounding array of electronics, began to smoke and shoot sparks. Sidekick kept the energy coming until the computer blew apart, leaving behind flaming components.

“There is less chance that he’s listening now,” Sidekick said.

“Does this mean we’re taking the crystal?” Cole asked.

“It means I don’t want Aeronomatron hearing one more word than necessary,” Sidekick said. “And I don’t want him talking to Datapoint ever again. She betrayed and endangered the entire population of Zeropolis by making contact with him.”

“Couldn’t Aero be helpful?” Cole asked.

“Undoubtedly,” Sidekick said. “But at what price? He has already shown what he wants. The intellect we were talking to could have held a billion similar conversations simultaneously without difficulty. That calculating intellect decided it should be in power, and killed more people than any disaster in the history of the Outskirts. People tried to reason with Aeronomatron. They tried to make compromises and treaties. In the end, all that stopped him was cutting him off. All it would take is one connection into our current systems and the nightmare begins again.”

“But aren’t the systems all separated now?” Cole asked.



“Not nearly enough,” Sidekick said. “Aero would find ways. Once he had a connection to the outside, he would do what he does, step by step, subverting system after system, adapting whatever elements he controls to extend his reach farther and farther. After an intellect that brilliant and methodical decides to destroy humanity, it doesn’t repent. It just waits for its next opportunity.”

“Scary,” Cole said. “That makes sense.”

“Plus, he has a horrible personality,” Sidekick said. “When you’re that powerful, I guess you don’t usually need to charm anyone.”

“So do we bring the crystal so we can destroy it?” Cole asked.

“No need,” Sidekick said. “Blake can change the harmonics right now. In fact, to be safe, he can change the harmonics of every crystal in this room.”

“Easy,” Blake said. “There are only twelve—one tuned to Aero, and eleven others tuned to each other. Those eleven link the machines that share data with Aero.”

“Do your thing,” Cole said.

Blake walked around the room pointing his finger at various machines. After less than fifteen seconds he faced Cole and Sidekick. “Done.”

“You’re amazing,” Sidekick said. “Nobody can do it that casually. You’re sure the harmonics are different?”

“For each crystal, I erased the harmonics, changed the shape, and set up new random harmonics.”

“Big question,” Sidekick said. “What about Aero’s crystal? Do you remember its harmonics?”

“It was pretty distinct,” Blake said.

“Can you forget it?” Sidekick asked.

“Maybe, if you give me some time,” Blake said. “I’m not a computer. I can’t just erase it. Think of the harmonics like a catchy tune. The more I try to forget it, the more it gets stuck in my head.”

“That’s a problem,” Sidekick said. “Potential contact with Aero remains a threat as long as you remember the harmonics.”

“I’ll forget,” Blake said.

“We’ll let Googol worry about it,” Sidekick said. “I take it you also remember some of the harmonics you used with Datapoint?”

“Not all,” Blake said. “But lots.”

“You could be a major asset for the rebellion,” Sidekick said.

“Everybody wants me for my tinkering,” Blake said with a sigh.

“At least you’re wanted now,” Cole replied. “The only person who used to like you was your mom.”

“I’d trade anything just to have her remember me,” Blake said heavily. “Or my dad. City Patrol let me use a thruport to send e-mails. I never heard back.”

“I tried too,” Cole said, feeling a little bad for his joke. “I had the same problem. We’ll figure it out. But not right now. Should we see if the escape tunnel works?”

“Sounds good,” Sidekick said, heading through the doorway.

“Think Datapoint will have people guarding this way out?” Cole asked.

“Depends how much credit she gives us and how much she trusts her people,” Sidekick said. “She didn’t know Aero was aware of this passage. And she probably doesn’t want anybody knowing about it. This room is the secret of her success, and if the secret got out, most everyone in Zeropolis would want her executed. I bet there are no guards. But best to be ready just in case.”

The hall went on for a serious distance. Finally they reached a steel door with a square slot to one side. Cole inserted the same crystal key, and the door opened.

They passed into a room with walls of steel. When the door shut behind them, there was no slot to open it. But a square slot on the other side of the room opened a new door, and they continued into a grungy basement. After the door closed, once again there was no way to backtrack.

A flight of stairs led up to a locked hatch in the ceiling. Sidekick used a tool to cut the lock on the hatch, and they went up to a higher basement.

“How far to Rainday?” Cole asked.

“It’ll take a few hours,” Sidekick said. “I’ll get us there underground. Stay with me.”



“Are we there yet?” Blake complained.

Cole rolled his eyes. This was far from the first time Blake had asked. They hadn’t been walking long before Blake began to make it clear how comfortable his life had been in the Outskirts so far. He didn’t like the grimy

tunnels. His feet hurt. He needed fresh air. He was hungry. He was thirsty. As the hours passed, his protests became more frequent.

“Does it look like we’re there?” Cole asked, holding out his hands to display the dank, empty tunnel.

“That’s the problem,” Blake griped. “It looks like we’re lost.”

“We don’t want anybody to see us,” Cole said. “Sidekick is taking us down paths that don’t get used much.”

“There’s a reason people stay away,” Blake said, eyeing a large spiderweb. “Is it worth hiding from Datapoint and the patrolmen if we die from spider bites and diseases?”

“We’re not going to get diseases,” Cole said, trying to be patient.

“Sidekick sure won’t,” Blake said. “He’s made of metal. And he doesn’t get tired. Maybe we should take a breather.”

“We just stopped like ten minutes ago,” Cole said. “If you want to get to Rainday, we need to keep walking.”

“Think Rainday will have beds?” Blake asked.

“Probably,” Sidekick said.

“I call top bunk,” Blake said. “I hate sleeping under people. It makes me feel like I’m in a drawer.”

“It might not be bunk beds,” Cole said.

“If it is, top bunk,” Blake said. “Man, my legs are beat!”

“I walked a lot farther than this to get here from Zeropolis,” Cole said.

“You had the battle suit,” Blake said. “Still do. Why not let me wear it for a while?”

“Because you don’t know how to use it in an emergency,” Cole replied.

“Maybe you’d take a rest now and then if a machine wasn’t walking for you,” Blake said.

“How much have you walked since coming to the Outskirts?” Cole asked.

“A normal amount,” Blake said.

“Have you ever slept on the ground?” Cole asked.

“I slept in the slave wagons,” Blake said. “Since then I’ve had a bed.”

“Have you ever been in danger?” Cole asked.

“I was a slave,” Blake said. “I had to follow orders. It wasn’t easy, but I never dealt with anything worse than that. Except now. How about you?”

“Soldiers have shot arrows at me,” Cole said. “I’ve fought monsters. I almost fell down a bottomless cliff. I’ve watched people die. I’ve run from

slavers, Enforcers, legionnaires, and patrolmen.”

Blake wiped his hands down his face. “And you’re who I’ve joined up with?”

“I warned you it would get ugly,” Cole said.

Blake shrugged. “I figured if you could handle it, I’d be fine.”

“Can you make a sled and pull him, Sidekick?” Cole asked.

“Probably,” Sidekick said. “But we’re almost beneath Unity Avenue and Long Street. You two should wait here. Let me go find the base and make sure it’s secure.”

“What if you don’t come back?” Blake asked.

“Follow Cole’s lead,” Sidekick said. “He’s a survivor.”

Cole appreciated the praise but felt a little worried. “You’ll be back though, right?”

“I plan to,” Sidekick said. “Sit tight.”

Blake looked around. “Couldn’t you leave us someplace a little less . . . moldy?”

“Don’t worry,” Sidekick assured him. “You won’t see any mold. It’ll be dark.”

As Sidekick trundled away, his lights faded and darkness closed in. Soon Cole could no longer see Blake. Then he couldn’t see anything.

“This is really dark,” Blake said. “I can’t tell if my eyes are open or closed.”

Cole felt tempted to remain silent. Then he felt tempted to growl or make choking sounds. “At least it means other people can’t see us.”

Blake lowered his voice. “Do you really think this rebellion business is a good idea?”

“Sure beats giving up,” Cole said.

“Is this how it is all the time for you?” Blake asked. “Hiding in sewers?”

“At least these are pretty dry,” Cole said. “You should smell the ones under Zeropolis.”

“Maybe I could do more if I let the patrolmen catch me,” Blake said. “You know, bring down the system from the inside.”

“And have plenty of food?” Cole asked. “And a comfy bed?”

“Not just that,” Blake said. “I have skills that make them really want me. I didn’t know about the rebellion before. I could help them big time if I was back with City Patrol.”

“How would you avoid copying more crystals for them?” Cole asked.

Blake paused. "Maybe I could get some wrong."

"City Patrol would catch on so fast," Cole said. "Plus, you've heard about the princesses. And you know how to contact Aero."

"Don't remind me," Blake said. "I'm trying to forget."

"They'll torture and imprison you if they find out what you know."

"I see why people flock to the rebellion."

Cole thought for a minute. "Do you wish you had let us go to the situation room without you?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Datapoint would have figured out I made the key. It could have gone pretty badly."

"Do you wish you hadn't made the key?" Cole asked.

"I wish . . . you hadn't seemed so confident. Like you knew what you were doing."

"I know what I'm doing."

"If you say so," Blake said. "I'm not sure crawling around in storm drains is what I would call freedom. We'll see what happens. Working for Datapoint wasn't great. If the Unseen have some decent bases, maybe this will get better."

"They had decent bases," Cole said. "Then you copied their crystals."

A light was returning.

"Is it the bot?" Blake murmured. "Should we hide?"

Cole got out his last tube of freeze-foam. "Doesn't look like Sidekick. Might be the ghost train."

"Shut up," Blake said. "There aren't any tracks."

"Why would a ghost train need tracks?" Cole asked. "It picks up the souls of people who complain too much."

"You'd complain too much if you . . ."

"If I what?"

"If you were good at something," Blake said. "I'm the best crystal shaper in the whole kingdom."

"And you like how your owners treated you," Cole said.

"They treated me really well," Blake said. "I'm not like you. I have other options."

"I have an ability too," Cole said.

"What?" Blake asked.

"It doesn't matter," Cole said wearily. "It got blocked by a shapecrafter. A

person who can shape the shaping power. But when I had it, I used it to help the rebellion. I didn't try to sell out."

"Are you even sure the Unseen are the good guys?" Blake asked. "Are you sure they aren't thieves and terrorists?"

"I know they don't support slavery," Cole said. "I know they don't steal the powers of their children and fake their deaths. I know they've given me real help."

Sidekick came into view. Googol was with him, wearing the same clothes Cole had seen him in last time, except they were torn and filthy. Then Dalton came into view.

"Dalton!" Cole called.

His friend broke into a huge smile. Then he blinked in surprise. "Is that Blake? Where'd you find him?"

"Long story," Cole said, running to Dalton. They hugged.

"I was worried about you," Dalton said.

"Same here," Cole replied. "I heard they found Forge's hideout."

"Yeah," Dalton said. "We all got away, though. He had a good escape plan. Secret is here too. She's safe. Forge and Scandal too."

"What about Jace?" Cole asked.

"We've lost track of him," Dalton said. "Trickster too. And Joe. But Trickster wasn't picked up, and we know Joe was with Outlaw. Jace met up with Roulette. Hopefully they're okay."

Blake gave Dalton a hug. "Good to see you," Blake said. "This is becoming a reunion. We'll have to play some soccer."

"Where have you been?" Dalton asked.

"We'll fill you in," Blake said. "Is there a base around here?"

"Not much of a base," Googol said. His voice was tired and a little hoarse. "More of a safe house. But we have food and places to sleep. I'm sorry for the way this has turned out. Let's get you inside. Welcome to Rainday."

## CHAPTER

# 22

## ENVOY

Cole sipped tomato soup from the edge of his spoon. He had blown on the spoonful to cool the thick red fluid, but it was still a little too hot. His stomach gurgled.

He sat on a slim chair that looked flimsy but felt sturdy. Googol, Forge, Dalton, Blake, Mira, and Sidekick shared the room. Rainday was nothing fancy—just a collection of connected underground rooms. The walls, ceilings, and floors were all made of gray cement, rough and unadorned. Cole hadn't seen many electronics, but there were plenty of crates and storage shelves.

Cole and Blake had just explained how they found each other, and Sidekick helped detail their encounter with Aeronomatron. Googol had listened soberly, asking minimal questions. Now he turned his vision gear toward Blake.

“You still recall how to make a crystal that can contact Aero?” Googol asked.

“I'm trying to forget,” Blake said nervously. He looked uncomfortable.

“It's hazardous knowledge,” Googol said. “But you learned it through no fault of your own. Will you vow never to create a crystal with those harmonics for any reason?”

“I can do better than that,” Blake said. “I'm going to forget how to do it. It'll just take a little time. Focusing on other harmonics should help.”

Googol nodded. “Your ability could provide just the help we need as we try to get our comms back up.”

“I’m happy to pitch in,” Blake said. “Do you have any bonded crystal that I can use as raw material?”

“An ample supply,” Googol said.

“He also remembers many of the harmonics he used working for Datapoint and City Patrol,” Sidekick said.

Googol grinned. “We can definitely put you to work.”

A door opened, and a woman with short white hair entered. Of medium height with a somewhat heavy build, she limped and used a cane. Her loose, unbuttoned sweater hung long, flowing behind her like a cape. Cole thought she looked about as old as his grandmother.

Googol rose. “I’d like you all to meet Nova, leader of the Unseen in Zeropolis.”

Cole stood up, as did the others.

Nova shook her head. “Please, sit down; I’m a freedom fighter, not a dignitary. I’m glad you all found your way here. It’s hardly a palace, but at least nobody is kicking down the doors yet.”

Nova moved one of the vacant chairs and sat beside Mira. The others sat down as well.

“Forge, well done bringing Secret here,” Nova said. She laid a hand on Mira’s wrist. “You are our hope.”

“I only brought trouble,” Mira said.

Nova shook her head. “This trouble has been coming for a long time. We were clearly more vulnerable than we realized. In a revolution, some lessons are only learned through bloodshed. We had grown complacent here in the old town. We should have anticipated this.”

“Is the revolution doomed?” Blake asked.

Nova regarded him in silence for a moment. “We’ve suffered major setbacks lately. We lost good people and important resources. But our people know their trade. More have slipped away into hiding than you might guess. Many of our most vital operatives remain free, some in solitude, some in quiet hideaways like this one. The fight will go on.”

“Nova has weathered worse than this,” Googol said. “While she’s standing, the revolution is in good hands.”

“Which means I better not lose my cane,” she said with a wink.

“Do you think the government is using a smart computer?” Cole asked.

“I know what you learned from Aeronomatron,” Nova said. “I’ve been



following this conversation, though I wasn't in the room. Bad habit, maybe, but it's what happens when you're hosted by spies. The use of a manufactured intelligence would help explain their sudden increase in efficiency. As would Blake's power."

"I was their slave," Blake said defensively. "I'm not from here. I did what they told me. I thought I was catching criminals."

"You were, according to their definition," Nova said. "You're still not sure whether you want to be here with us. Don't deny it—I can tell. Furthermore, I can understand. You're far from home. You've already been displaced. Why should you also join a losing cause and give up the comforts City Patrol provided?"

"It might have crossed my mind," Blake admitted guiltily.

"You played a major role in helping our enemies access our secrets," Nova said. "Your ability blindsided us. But it could also help us fight back."

"It's not too late?" Blake asked.

Nova shook her head. "Our enemies are hitting us so hard because they're scared. We still have enough people to regroup and fight back. Secret and her relatives could heat up the revolution from a brushfire to an inferno. But the government will try to stamp out the blaze before it can spread. We're on the verge of a real opportunity to gain popular support."

"We have to find who I'm looking for," Mira said.

"Exactly," Nova said. "Googol and I have conferred, and I've just reached a decision about how we'll do that. It involves your friend Cole. You told me that you trust him completely?"

"Yes," Mira said, looking distressed. "But I don't want him in more danger."

Cole quietly agreed with her but kept silent. What could they possibly need from him?

"We're all in danger," Googol said, leaning forward. "Cole is currently in a unique position to aid us."

"How?" Cole asked.

Nova leveled her gaze at him. "Can we speak in private? I want to discuss a possible mission of the utmost secrecy."

"Okay," Cole said, with a nervous glance at Dalton. His friend looked worried for him.

Nova stood. "This way. Bring your soup."

Cole followed her out of the room, down a hall, around a corner, through a door, then through a thicker door into a small room. A simple crystal lamp hung from the ceiling above two chairs and a table.

Nova claimed one of the chairs and indicated the other. Cole took a seat across from her. Being there alone with her felt very formal and official. She nodded at his bowl of soup. "Go ahead."

He tried a sip. It was still quite warm, but no longer too hot. He took another sip. Nova watched him. It felt weird eating with such an attentive audience.

"How many robots do you guys have?" Cole asked to break the silence.

"Not enough," Nova replied. "Our bots have been vital in helping us through the recent crisis. But care must be taken. If we make too many smart robots, this war could unintentionally evolve to man against machine."

"Sidekick is great," Cole said.

"He's my personal favorite," Nova said. "Even if his humble routine is partly an act, it works. I like him. How's the soup?"

"Tasty," Cole said. "Do you guys have any other special weapons?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What have you heard?"

"Nothing," Cole said. "I love the warboard and the battle suits. The bots are great. You guys are so high tech, I just wondered if there is anything else."

"Some of our more hawkish members would like us to deploy a harmony bomb," she said.

"What's that?" Cole asked.

Nova stared at him as if gauging the sincerity of his question, then gave a nod. "It's a theoretical weapon of enormous destructive capacity. Your world has atom bombs. You're familiar with them?"

"I know the basics," Cole said. "I couldn't build one."

"A harmony bomb would have a similar destructive impact," she said. "In fact, the strongest models I have conceptualized would have more punch than any nuclear weapons your world currently has developed, but without the radiation. A clean explosion of gargantuan power."

"Could it take out the whole city?" Cole asked.

"A big one would destroy a large part of it," Nova said. "And leave a lot more of it damaged."

"Do you have any?" Cole asked.

"A harmony bomb has never been detonated," Nova said. "Not even as a

test out in the empty wastes. But together, Googol and I have the capacity to make one. He has the know-how to engineer the physical device, and I can provide the power.”

“Is that your shaping ability?” Cole asked.

“I’m a sparker,” Nova said.

“It matches your name,” Cole said. “Nova.”

“An exploding star. Since a harmony bomb has never been tested, we can’t be sure it would work. But in theory, if you properly prepare a harmonic crystal, and then overload it with a sudden influx of energy, it should blow apart in spectacular fashion.”

“How would you use a harmony bomb?” Cole asked.

“That’s the problem,” Nova said. “Such a weapon is a hammer, not a scalpel. We don’t know how to make a small-scale harmonic explosive. It would take so much energy to detonate even the tiniest model that the blast would be devastating. We couldn’t take out City Patrol Headquarters, for example, without also demolishing the city for dozens of blocks all around it. We’re champions of the people, not terrorists.”

“Does City Patrol know you could make a harmony bomb?” Cole asked.

“Abram Trench knows I have the potential,” Nova said. “We worked together years ago, before he became Grand Shaper. Selfish old crab. Politician to the core. Not a sincere bone in his body. No real interest in the common good. But he does worry about himself.”

“You want him scared,” Cole said.

“It’s one way to keep a selfish man out of your business. Nobody in the Outskirts can equal my energy output, and he can’t be sure I wouldn’t use my gift to fuel an explosive device if the situation became bleak enough. Even if I would never actually condone such a weapon, the mere threat provides a useful deterrent. I believe it is part of the reason City Patrol never became serious about interfering with our affairs in Old Zeropolis until now.”

“Which means he’s more worried about finding Secret than he is about a harmony bomb,” Cole said.

Nova tapped the side of her nose and pointed at him. “Exactly. We have reached a decisive hour. Cole, we have exhausted every resource to find Constance. According to Sidekick, even that know-it-all Aeronatron couldn’t venture a guess as to her whereabouts. The revolution in Zeropolis is

in real danger of failing. We have to find Constance quickly. I know of only one remaining option.”

“Something I can help with?” Cole asked, still unsure what she wanted from him.

“There is one who could mark Constance’s location for us,” Nova said.

“Mira’s mother,” Cole said, remembering the stars.

“Mira keeps watch every night,” Nova said. “But no star has appeared. We have to communicate our need to Harmony Pemberton.”

“Wait,” Cole said, pausing with a spoonful of soup on the way to his mouth. “You want me to be a messenger?”

“We’ve sent envoys to Harmony in the past,” Nova explained. “She sent a representative to us once. Our last envoy did not make it to her. The legionnaires got him, though he was not taken alive. The mission would be very risky.”

“Sounds like it,” Cole said, dread pooling inside of him.

“You are in a unique position to do this,” Nova said. “As a child, you are likely to be overlooked as a threat. You already know the secret about Miracle and her sisters. The princess trusts you. And perhaps most importantly, your face is not in the identification system used by City Patrol.”

“What about my fake IDs?” Cole asked.

“Your first fake ID was completely expunged from the records,” she said. “The second was recorded but has been rendered inaccessible. Your current false ID will read as valid to scanners, but your identity can’t be investigated using the system. Somebody doesn’t want you found.”

“The Hunter?” Cole asked.

“That’s our guess,” Nova said. “When you helped rescue Joe, the Hunter went to great lengths to capture you without anyone knowing. He tried to recruit you, correct?”

“He told me I was on the wrong side,” Cole said. “He probably wanted me to lead him to Mira without City Patrol knowing.”

“I’m sure that’s part of it,” Nova said. “But why not give Jace and Dalton the same treatment? Nobody tampered with their records. Tell me about your shaping power.”

“It’s blocked,” Cole said. “I can’t use it. I’ve been trying.”

“A vicious act of shapecraft,” Nova replied. “Unnatural and spiteful. What could you do before your power was blocked?”

“I could make stuff from Sambria work in Elloweer,” Cole said.

Nova nodded slowly. “A rare gift. If not unique. I have heard of those who can work powerful shapings in different kingdoms. But never one who can make an item that does not pertain to a certain kingdom regain functionality. The High King may not just want you in order to find Mira. He may have a specific interest in you as well. We know that he likes to employ those with unusual shaping talents. And we know he has stolen powers.”

Cole thought about the shapecraft experiments Quima had hinted about after they had defeated Carnag. Did the High King want to experiment on him?

“Doesn’t this make me a bad messenger?” Cole asked.

“It increases the risks you’ll incur if you get caught,” Nova said. “But the classified status of your ID enables you to move about the kingdom without getting stopped. And your youth will still help you avoid notice.”

“Can’t Forge make a classified ID for somebody?” Cole asked.

Nova shook her head. “Classified IDs are rare enough that those systems are closely monitored. All attempts to fake one have failed. But yours is genuine. With the attacks of the last few days, our records have been compromised. We can’t send out any of our agents with any confidence. You are the ideal candidate to find Harmony Pemberton and ask her to hang a star over Constance.”

“I’d go alone?” Cole asked, pretty sure he already knew the answer.

“Sidekick and Googol would accompany you to the main terminal in Zeropolis,” Nova said. “After that you’d proceed on your own. The Junction Express runs to the border of Junction. From there you switch to an electric train that will take you into the heart of the capital.”

“The train works in Junction?” Cole asked.

“Our pure energy dissipates there,” Nova said. “Certain materials we manufacture won’t hold together either. Bonded crystal, for example. But by converting our energy to electricity, and building the train out of the correct materials, we engineered a rail system that functions there. A passenger can travel from the main terminal in Zeropolis to the center of Junction City in under seven hours.”

Cole thought about the message from Trillian. Was this the key service he could perform for the rebellion? Could this be what the torivor had meant?

“Do the others know about this?” Cole asked.

“Only me, Googol, and Sidekick know what we’re considering,” Nova said. “We won’t tell anyone else until you return. This mission requires the highest secrecy. The High King has never fully trusted his wife, but if she gets exposed as a traitor, our cause could be ruined. In addition, with all you know, your capture would be problematic.”

“What should I do if they catch me?” Cole asked.

“Don’t get caught,” Nova said.

“Right,” Cole said. “But if it happens?”

“You’ll do your best. Nobody will come to help you. After you leave, we’ll go elsewhere. You won’t know our location. Your information about Mira would surprise many, but not the High King or the Hunter. If you get apprehended, you won’t know where to find her. That lack of information could lead to very uncomfortable times for you, but the princess would remain relatively safe.”

Cole knew she was talking about torture. Of course, that risk awaited anytime he got captured, not just on this mission. Wasn’t he in nearly as much danger hiding in Old Zeropolis with the Unseen as he would be going to Junction? The City Patrol had proven they could track down Unseen hideouts. At least if he went to Junction, he would be useful.

And who knew what other answers Junction might hold? Maybe Queen Harmony could tell him where Jenna was sent. Surely she would have access to that information. The queen might even be able to suggest strategies for how he and his friends could get home and stay there. And if all she did was help them find Constance, that would still be a big step toward helping Mira’s revolution succeed.

It would be scary to go alone. But Cole had done scary things before. If this went smoothly, it might just be a train ride and some talking.

“How will I meet up with the queen?” Cole asked.

Nova smiled. “You’re a brave boy. I’m an old devil for using children like I do.”

“You mean the Crystal Keepers?”

“They’ve proven extremely effective. I can’t resist successful tactics. We’ll provide a disguise. The First Castle has many errand boys running around. You will masquerade as one of them. We have protocols you can use to contact Queen Harmony.”

If this mission were only about Nova and her resistance movement, Cole

wasn't sure how he would respond. But Mira needed to find Constance in order to move forward. Overthrowing the High King would also provide his best chance to free his missing friends and maybe find a way home. And who knew what extra information Queen Harmony might be able to share?

"How could I say no?" Cole said.

"You can," Nova said. "And you should if this assignment sounds like too much. If you take on this responsibility, you must succeed. Your life depends on it, as does the entire revolution."

"I'll do it," Cole said. "I won't let you down."

"Thank you, Cole. This could help us turn the tide. Are you going to finish your soup?"

Cole glanced down at the red fluid in his bowl. "Maybe later. I kind of lost my appetite."

## CHAPTER

# 23

## JUNCTION

Cole boarded the Junction Express less than a minute before it was scheduled to depart. The interior of this monorail was more posh than the other one Cole had ridden. The cars were roomier, the larger seats reclined farther, and details like the carpeting and the fixtures looked newer and fancier.

Cole found his seat and stowed his rucksack, then tried out the cushy recliner. He had enough legroom to stretch out as much as he wanted.

The monorail was less than half full. Most of the other customers appeared wealthy—some wore fancy clothes; others were stylishly grungy. With his leather jacket and dark jeans, Cole supposed he fit in with the fashionably scruffy.

Nova had urged him to tell nobody he was leaving, but Dalton knew he had talked privately with Nova, and when Cole started talking sentimentally last night, his friend had grilled him until he confessed he had a mission. He gave Dalton no specifics and swore him to secrecy.

As he waited for the monorail to start moving, Cole felt glad that his friend knew he was leaving. Dalton had come a long way with him. It wouldn't have been fair to go without a good-bye. Besides, he knew Dalton would keep the secret just as faithfully as Nova or Googol.

The journey from Old Zeropolis to the main terminal in Zeropolis had only taken a few hours. Cole, Googol, and Sidekick had all ridden warboards through the underground tunnels, whooshing along with Sidekick lighting the way. They had left Cole with a ticket in hand near a ladder that allowed him



to surface near the main terminal. Not more than ten or fifteen minutes had passed since he left them.

The monorail eased forward so smoothly that the rapid acceleration felt subtle. Soon Zeropolis blurred by the windows, and Cole was on his way.

He felt vulnerable. He was leaving behind Dalton and the friends he had made in the Outskirts. He had no backup. And he had stripped off his gear before exiting the tunnels near the main terminal. Advanced devices like an exo rig would malfunction in Junction. Googol didn't try to send along simpler weapons or equipment on the theory that Cole's safest strategy was to appear innocent.

Settling back into his seat, Cole closed his eyes and remembered Jace's advice that the best way not to be noticed was to look at home. He itched to watch for people observing him but told himself that if he looked at ease and ready for a nap, nobody would pay any attention to him.

The Hunter was his biggest threat. Cole's ID might be classified in the City Patrol's system, but Googol and Nova had no doubts that the Hunter and his people would be watching for Cole's ID card to be used. That was why Googol had suggested he board the train at the last moment. It would give the Hunter almost no time to react before the monorail left the city at hundreds of miles per hour.

Cole tilted his seat back. It was strange to lounge in such comfort after sneaking through sewers the past few days. If he had to go on a dangerous mission alone, this was definitely the way to travel.

He had stayed up late stewing about the mission, and after an early start had spent hours zooming along on a warboard underground. Before long, his pretend nap melted into real sleep. When he woke with a start, the monorail was at a standstill, and people were pressing toward the exits.

Grabbing his rucksack, Cole joined the people filing off the monorail. This was the transfer where the passengers had to switch from the monorail powered by Zeropolitan energy to a train propelled by electricity.

Cole shuffled forward, staying near a man about the right age to be his father, hoping to create the illusion that they were traveling together. There was a chance the Hunter would come for him here, at Outpost 19. If so, Cole's best bet was to stay with the crowd, since the Hunter had shown interest in apprehending him secretly. Because this was an isolated outpost on the border with Junction, Googol was betting that the Hunter wouldn't be

able to move people into place in time. But if the Hunter had noticed Cole use his ID, he would certainly position fellow Enforcers to intercept him in Junction City. For that reason, Googol had assured Cole that some of the Unseen in Junction would create a diversion to stop the train before it reached the Junction City Station. Cole would use that opportunity to exit early and hopefully avoid an encounter with the Hunter's agents. There would be no napping during this second leg of the trip!

The other train looked a lot like the first one, especially inside. Cole found his seat, stowed his bag, and sat down without incident.

As the train pulled out of the station, Cole found that it didn't accelerate as smoothly or run as quietly as his previous train, but it still reached an impressive top speed. Cole imagined that it was the equivalent of a bullet train on Earth.

After napping for much of the previous ride, Cole felt much more alert but still tried not to show too much interest in the people around him. His seat on this train was near an emergency exit, which he was supposed to use when the train stopped early. He wasn't sure when exactly that would happen but knew it would be toward the end of the journey.

A woman came by selling drinks and sandwiches, and Cole bought a soda and a croissant loaded with chicken salad. As he ate, out of the corner of his eye Cole couldn't help noticing a man across the aisle staring at him. When Cole turned to look at him, the man hastily glanced away.

Cole couldn't tell whether the sick feeling inside was because he was tense and overly sensitive, or because the man was up to no good. The fellow passenger was stocky and bald on top, with short black hair around the rim of his skull and heavy black eyebrows. He had fairly young features and wore a dark blue suit. Cole didn't recognize him from the other train, but he had made a point of not paying too much attention to the other passengers.

Taking another bite of his croissant, Cole decided he was probably just too wound up. He didn't want to lose his cool and look suspicious. But before he had finished his sandwich, Cole caught the man looking again, only to have him glance away a second time.

In his gut Cole knew something was up. The man had to look across the aisle and a couple of other people to watch Cole. Either the guy really regretted not ordering a croissant, or he was spying on him.

Now that Cole was awake and stressed, the ride seemed to take forever.

The man didn't look over again, but sometimes Cole had an uneasy sense that he might be watching him peripherally.

When Cole got up to use the restroom, the man didn't look his way. As he walked down the aisle, Cole cast a swift glance over his shoulder and found the man staring right at him. The man turned his head, coughing into his fist and averting his eyes.

In the bathroom, Cole tried to generate alternate explanations. Maybe the man thought he looked familiar. Maybe the man was a people watcher. Maybe Cole had invited curiosity by glancing over at him too much.

There were plausible reasons not to be worried, but Cole's instincts told him the man was a threat. When it came time to abandon the train, Cole would have to watch out for that guy.

As Cole returned to his seat, the man never glanced his way. Back in his seat, Cole tried to clear his mind and act calm. He didn't catch the man looking over again.

Well into the trip, the train began to slow, and a soothing, female voice came over a loudspeaker. "Please remain in your seats. The train is stopping due to debris on the tracks. This is not our final destination. Please remain in your seats."

Cole felt clammy. This was it. As the train slowed, he planned his next moves. He needed to get into the aisle, grab his bag, take the few steps to the emergency exit, and leave the train.

Turning his head, Cole found the man looking at him curiously. This time the man didn't glance away. Cole broke off the eye contact.

He tried not to panic, but he was breathing hard. As soon as he grabbed his bag, the man would know he was getting off. But he couldn't leave the rucksack! It contained his errand-boy uniform along with some instructions.

The train stopped.

"Please remain seated as the debris is cleared from the tracks," the soothing voice said. "We are not at a station. This is only a temporary stop. Please remain seated."

Cole stood and clutched his stomach. "I think I'm going to be sick." He winced and moaned as he slid past a woman into the aisle. The man across the aisle was watching him, but Cole avoided direct eye contact.

Cole snatched his rucksack and ran. He shoved open the emergency exit and a buzzer blared. A quick glance back showed the man hurrying up the

aisle behind him.

From the steps beyond the doorway, Cole saw they were in a big city. None of the buildings were as tall or modern as in Zeropolis, but they went on as far as Cole could see, the highest rooftops level with the elevated train track. Cole jumped down to a narrow walkway. Looking toward the front of the train, he saw people at work clearing the debris. The track stretched on behind the train as far as he could see, paralleled by the walkway. Wanting to avoid the people at the front of the train, Cole raced toward the back.

He heard somebody land on the walkway behind him. A hasty glance showed that it was the man from across the aisle.

Racing at a full sprint, Cole could hear the man running behind him. Eyes frantically searching, he saw no stairs or ladders leading down from the elevated track. Jumping was not an option—he had to be forty or fifty feet up.

He could hear the man gaining on him. Cole had almost reached the back of the train when he noticed a pair of planks up ahead bridging the gap between the walkway along the track and the top of a nearby building about twenty feet away. The weathered planks had no railings and weren't visibly anchored to anything.

They were also his best chance.

Cole slowed as he reached the planks. The two were spaced a few inches apart, each no more than a foot wide.

“Don't do it, kid,” the man called. “Stop!”

There was no time to think it through.

Cole shuffled out onto the planks, sliding his feet rather than stepping, one foot on each board. He clasped the rucksack to his chest to keep his balance centered. The boards sagged and bounced as he got to the middle, creaking menacingly. He could picture them snapping. If they did, there would be no defense, nothing to grab. He could imagine himself falling—no Jumping Sword, no exo rig, just a long drop until his bones crunched against the pavement below.

As he drew near the building, the planks flexed less. Emboldened, Cole took a few quick steps and leaped to the roof. Turning, he found the man standing on the walkway at the far side of the planks, staring at him from across the gap.

“You're making a big mistake, kid,” the man said. “I'm here to help you.”

Cole pushed one of the planks off the roof of the building. The man

caught hold of the other end, but as Cole's end fell, the board was torn from the man's grasp and plunged to the ground below.

The man hopped onto the other plank and started toward Cole, edging forward, one foot staying in front of the other. With the man's weight on the board, Cole found it harder to budge, but a good kick made it slide a little. The board wobbled, and the man pinwheeled his arms, knees bending, body swaying, eyes bulging.

"Don't, kid, you'll kill me. I'm just trying to help!"

The man was still closer to the walkway than the building. He recovered his balance and stared at Cole, no longer advancing.

"Go back," Cole said. "Take one more step this way and you're going for a ride."

The man gave a little nod. He wiped a palm across his scalp. His voice became calmer. "Come on, kid. Let me help you."

"You work for the Hunter," Cole said.

"Maybe I do," the man said evenly. "The Hunter wants to help you. If he wanted you hurt or killed, I could have taken care of that the second I jumped off the train. If he just wanted you caught, that could have happened back at the main terminal. He wants to bring you in quietly and give you a second chance."

"I don't want to be captured by anybody."

The man shook his head ruefully. "It's just a matter of time before somebody brings you in, kid. If it isn't the Hunter, you're going to be sorry."

Cole wondered if the man was an Enforcer. If so, he had some shaping abilities. Whatever his talents, they would be limited here in Junction. But he could still be very dangerous.

"I don't want to kill you, mister, but I don't have time for this. I'm not going with you. I don't want you chasing me. Don't come any closer. I'm counting to three, then I'm kicking the board off. One. Two."

He wasn't bluffing, and apparently the man could tell. He backed away and then lunged to the walkway beside the track. As soon as the man was clear, Cole kicked the plank off the roof. The man made no move to grab it. The board turned as it fell and slapped hard against the ground below.

Without a backward glance, Cole went through the nearest door on the rooftop. A man waited for him on the staircase beyond. He was short and

thin, with a yellowish pallor and a scraggly beard that grew thicker on his neck than his chin.

“I’m Julian,” he said. “Googol sent me.”

“What’s the password?” Cole asked.

“We all have secrets.”

“Unless we tell them.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“I had the same idea.”

## CHAPTER

# 24

## ERRAND BOY

Cole and Julian said nothing more to each other for several minutes. They just ran. The path felt like an urban obstacle course—down stairs, out a window, along alleys, over fences, through several shops, across a crowded marketplace, under a bridge, and finally into a black horse-drawn coach.

As far as Cole could tell, nobody had chased them during the entire run. Despite his somewhat sickly appearance, Julian had kept the pace fast enough to leave Cole gasping for breath with a stitch in his side. It was a moment before either of them spoke.

“Is this your coach?” Cole asked, still panting. The rich interior featured fine, dark leather and velvet curtains.

“I don’t own it,” Julian said. “I’m the driver.”

“Who owns it?” Cole asked.

“Nathan Nicolls,” Julian said, leaning back in his seat. “A fancy guy. Manages perishable supplies at the First Castle. He doesn’t work in the kitchens directly. He makes sure they have quality ingredients to prepare food for the High King and his guests. It pays enough for Nathan to live a little like royalty himself.”

“You sound relaxed,” Cole said. “Do you think we got away?”

“We’ll know soon enough,” Julian said. “If we didn’t, there isn’t much we can do now. If somebody tracked us to this coach, we’re about to get arrested. But it seemed to me like we slipped away clean. You?”

“I think so,” Cole said. “Are you Unseen?”

“I’m about as close as it comes here in Junction,” Julian said, picking at his teeth with a fingernail. “It’s hard to keep organized here. We’re too close to the seat of power. The Unseen keep losing people. The big fish get caught. It works better to operate solo.”

“Googol contacted you?” Cole asked.

“He has ways,” Julian said. “I help where I can. I’m no expert. Sorry about those planks from the track to the building. Best I could manage on short notice.”

“It worked,” Cole said. “I was glad to have help.”

“I can do what you need today,” Julian said. “I’ll get you into the First Castle. The rest is up to you.”

“That’s great!” Cole said. “Googol only told me that somebody would meet me. I wasn’t sure how much help to expect. I was ready for somebody to just point me in the right direction.”

“I can’t do too much more than that,” Julian said. “I’ll take you to a good starting point. Just don’t mention me if you get caught.”

“I won’t,” Cole said.

“None of the Unseen have yet,” Julian said.

“Have some been caught?” Cole asked.

Julian raised his eyebrows. “You know how it goes. Folks disappear. You never hear from them again. But nobody has coughed up my name yet.”

“Isn’t it a big risk that they might?” Cole asked.

“You bet,” Julian said. “But I believe in the cause. And I get paid well enough. Double for you, since I had to stick my neck out back at the tracks.”

“Did you stop the train?” Cole asked.

“No, no,” Julian said. “Somebody else had that job. No idea who. They were probably long gone before the train stopped. My job was getaway and delivery to the First Castle. You have an outfit?”

Cole hefted the bag he had carried from the train. “Errand boy. Googol told me you might have some tips for me.”

“Ever work as a courier before?” Julian asked.

“Not really,” Cole said. “And I’ve never been to Junction City.”

“Hmm,” Julian mused. “You must be pretty slick. They would typically only send somebody familiar with the ins and outs of the First Castle to infiltrate it.”

“I’m what they had,” Cole said. “It was short notice. Maybe they should



have used you.”

Julian shook his head. “I don’t mind moving a person now and again. But once you start prowling around and trading secrets, Owandell finds out and that’s it.” He slid his finger across his throat.

Cole had seen Owandell before. Or at least a skillful imitation of him. When Cole, Jace, and Mira had tried to win Honor’s freedom from the torivor, their first challenge had been to visit a fabricated version of the First Castle on the day Stafford had stolen his daughters’ shaping powers and staged their deaths. As a consequence, Cole knew something about what the First Castle looked like, along with Owandell and Queen Harmony, although the day he had experienced happened around sixty years ago, so a lot might have changed since then.

“He’s pretty dangerous?” Cole asked.

“Let me put it this way,” Julian said. “People at the First Castle won’t say anything against the High King in public. But Owandell—people don’t talk about him in private, either.”

“Scared?” Cole asked.

“The fear runs deep for good reason. People who take an interest in him run into bad luck. Those who criticize him vanish. It happens quietly and reliably. I hope your business doesn’t involve him or his Enforcers.”

“No. He’s been around a long time?”

“As long as the High King,” Julian said. “If anything, Owandell ages slower.” He shuddered. “I don’t even like mentioning him here alone with you.”

“My lips are sealed,” Cole said.

“There’s an army of errand boys at the First Castle,” Julian said. “They get used throughout Junction City. The uniform makes you close to invisible in any public area. Errand boys get room and board, but beyond that they generally work only for gratuities. Always wait for your tip, unless the message recipient makes it clear you’re not getting one. Do you have a message to go with the uniform?”

“Yes,” Cole said.

“No need to tell me who it’s for,” Julian said. “If you need help, act like it’s your first day.”

“That shouldn’t be hard to fake,” Cole said.

“New lads are always starting out,” Julian said. “Errand boys have to give

up the job once they turn fifteen. The youngest start at ten, but plenty begin at twelve or thirteen. Make sure you can name a syndicate you work for. The Falcons is a big one. Nobody knows all the Falcon boys.”

“Okay,” Cole said.

“People probably won’t ask,” Julian said. “As an errand boy, you’re basically part of the furniture. It’s like being a guardsman. Folks see the uniform, not the person.”

Cole opened his rucksack and removed the gray outfit. It included shoes, hose, trousers, a shirt, a jacket, and a flat hat with a slender feather in it. The clothing reminded Cole of some goofy costumes he had seen at the Arizona Renaissance Festival. There was also a paper with information about addressing royalty.

“I’ll go up top and start driving,” Julian said. “If we had been followed, we’d be swarmed by now.”

Cole thought about how the Hunter had followed him and Jace from Hanover Station to zerobase before striking. Might he do the same again? What if Cole led trouble to Queen Harmony? What if the Hunter’s Enforcers picked up Julian after they parted? Cole decided it might be best to keep those thoughts to himself.

“Okay,” Cole said. “Thanks for the lift.”

“Take care,” Julian said. “I don’t expect to speak to you again. Keep your cool and lay low. Once we’re inside, I’ll stop by the interior stables and knock twice if all is clear. Get out the left side and go about your business. If we get stopped, I’ll pretend I was giving you a lift as a favor. You do the same.”

“Got it,” Cole said.

Julian exited the compartment, and a moment later the coach rolled forward. As Cole started putting on his errand-boy uniform, he wondered if the driver’s name was really Julian. He also wondered if the coach’s owner was really named Nathan, and if he did anything involving food supplies. If the driver had much sense of self-preservation, probably not.



Cole sat in silence as Julian exchanged pleasantries with an unseen guard at the gates of the First Castle. He stated that his business was to do his regular pickup but spoke no names, leaving Cole still unsure about the true identity of the coach’s owner.

Sitting inside the coach with the curtains drawn closed, Cole hoped the guard wouldn't check the vehicle. He wasn't hidden. The guard needed only to open the coach door to see him plainly. As the coach proceeded, Cole rubbed his eyes in relief. He shifted to the edge of his seat, ready for the coach to stop and the double knock to signal that he could exit.

Cole wanted to peek out the window to see the castle but knew it wasn't worth the risk. What if somebody who knew the coach's owner saw him? How dumb would it be to raise suspicions for an early peek of something he would get to see momentarily?

He tapped the sealed cylinder against the palm of his free hand. The cylinder was addressed to the Honorable Barton Skellers. Finding Barton would be the first step to making contact with Queen Harmony.

The coach continued at a modest pace for some time. How big was this castle? He had only seen some of it at the Lost Palace.

The coach stopped. Reaching for the door, Cole waited for the knock. The coach started forward again. Were they at the stables? Had something gone wrong? Or had it been a random pause on their way to the stables?

Cole hated not being able to look out of the curtains. What if he wasn't even at the First Castle? What if the Hunter had intercepted the password? What if Julian was an imposter? He had no sure idea of his location beyond a conversation overheard between the driver and a supposed guard.

The coach stopped again. Cole was left hanging, waiting for the knocks, then the coach went forward, ending the anticipation.

Cole calmed himself down. A castle was a busy place. Of course there would be random stops. Right?

The coach halted again. Two quick knocks immediately followed.

Cole opened the door on the left side of the compartment and got out facing a blank wall. He shut the door and the coach rolled forward. Julian didn't look back at him. Cole started walking in the opposite direction.

The bulky style of the stacked towers and battlements of the castle looked familiar from the illusion he'd explored at the Lost Palace, though he hadn't seen this side of the compound before. The soaring walls containing the yards and outbuildings loomed much as he remembered. He supposed that it took a while for the walls of an ancient castle to look any different.

After Julian passed out of view, no other people shared the narrow yard behind the stables. But when Cole walked around to the front, many other

people came into sight. He noted several guardsmen, some men working with horses, a lovely young woman in riding clothes, a couple of stable boys, and another errand boy. Nobody paid Cole any attention.

He kept walking. Cole decided that if he kept striding purposefully, everyone would assume he belonged. As he made his way along a lane between a couple of buildings, passing several other people, Cole didn't feel particularly in sync with castle life, but he could tell that his camouflage was effective.

After walking around a couple more buildings, skirting a rectangular pool choked with lily pads, and passing through a covered walkway, Cole emerged into a huge courtyard that he immediately recognized. This was where he had met Queen Harmony and her daughters in Trillian's contest! The people present and the new design of the guard's uniforms were the only significant differences from the version Cole had experienced. Trillian had really nailed the details!

As he strode across the vast yard, Cole thought about how Trillian had told him he would play a vital role in the revolution. Was this the fulfillment of that prediction? Had the torivor made part of their contest to rescue Honor happen at the First Castle because he knew Cole would end up here? Or was it coincidence? How much could the torivor really know? Could he see the future? Maybe he saw deep enough into the present to make educated guesses.

Cole watched for somebody to casually ask about Barton Skellers. He wanted a person who looked knowledgeable and reasonably kind. That was hard to judge using only appearances, but since looks were all he had to go by, he made guesses based mostly on expressions.

As he furtively studied people and considered who he might actually approach, Cole decided that he didn't want a guardsman who might get suspicious, or a lord who would be insulted by the bother. Some common laborer who looked friendly would be good.

He noticed a couple of other errand boys. One was kind of heavy with dark hair and a friendly face. The boy looked a year or two younger than Cole.

Changing direction and quickening his pace, Cole intercepted the dark-haired errand boy. "Hey," Cole said. "Do you have a second?"

"If you walk with me," the kid said, not with attitude, but not too friendly, either.

“I have a message for the Honorable Barton Skellers,” Cole said.

The boy looked a little impressed. “Good for you.”

“You know him?” Cole asked.

“You don’t?” the boy replied with a smirk.

“I’m pretty new,” Cole said.

“New to the job, or new to Junction?” the boy asked incredulously. “How do you not know the royal chamberlain?”

“I’ve heard of him,” Cole lied. “That doesn’t mean I know how to find him.”

The boy gave a derisive snort. “New or not, finding people is what we do. The chamberlain is easy. Tell you what, trade me messages. I’ll take it.” He held up his message—a rolled parchment, sealed with wax. “This guy, Tom Portman, is in that building over there.”

The kid clearly thought the message to Barton carried more prestige and probably a bigger tip. Rather than help Cole out, the boy wanted to take advantage of him.

“I’m delivering it,” Cole said. “I was just asking a question.”

“Then stop being helpless and figure it out.”

The obnoxious kid looked spoiled and soft. Cole had survived too much to let some pompous little jerk blow him off. As his anger rose, Cole couldn’t help thinking how Jace would handle the situation.

Cole clapped the kid on the back of his neck, a chummy gesture, but he slapped him too hard, and he kept his hand there, squeezing. The kid stopped and stared up with wide eyes.

“How’s this?” Cole said through a big smile, his grip firm. “I’m new here today. I’m not new to beating up little jokes like you. Don’t you have enough enemies in your life?”

The kid looked like he might cry. “Just go through the castle door over there. Head straight until you get stopped, and show your message for the chamberlain. The guards will direct you.”

Cole released the back of his neck. “Was that so hard?”

The kid straightened his coat. “What syndicate are you with?” he asked, trying to sound casual. Cole guessed the kid probably wanted to get him in trouble for intimidating him.

“Your mom’s,” Cole said. “It’s pretty run down, but I joined up on a dare.” Cole walked away before the kid could ask more questions, striding

importantly.

The kid had been rude, but Cole felt bad for being so hard on him. He probably should have bailed out when the conversation went the wrong direction and asked somebody else. He got the info he wanted, but at the risk of starting trouble. The high stakes of his mission had him wound up. He needed to settle down and be less emotional.

Cole went through the door the kid had indicated. The guards paid him no mind, and Cole marched straight down the hall, up some stairs, then continued straight, passing other halls. Before long the hall ended at a large door with four armored guards.

One of the guards held out a gauntleted hand. "Let me see that."

Cole handed over the cylinder. The guard gave the seal a cursory look.

"Haven't seen you before," the guard told Cole.

"I'm pretty stealthy," Cole said.

The guard didn't look amused.

"Also, I'm pretty new," Cole amended.

"Do you know the way to the chamberlain's quarters?" the guard asked.

"No," Cole said.

The guard described some stairs and turns. Cole did his best to memorize them. The door opened, and he entered a much more beautifully decorated hall. Framed paintings hung on the walls. A rich carpet ran down the center of the floor. Elegant items of furniture were spaced at intervals on either side.

Cole tried to follow the turns prescribed by the guard but soon felt sure he was lost. He paused and asked for clarifications from a guard with a heavy mustache and got back on the right path.

Before too long Cole stood outside an elaborately carved door with a pair of middle-aged guards, armored men with no-nonsense expressions. Cole held up the message cylinder. "I'm looking for the chamberlain."

"You came to the right place," one of the guards said. "One moment."

He unlocked the door with a key and went inside. Soon after he returned. "Come in. You can wait here." He indicated a low, white loveseat.

Cole sat down and the guard exited. There were several other seats in the room, all empty, and not much else besides tapestried walls. Though he was alone, Cole assumed it was a waiting room.

A few minutes later a door opened. A stooped old man dressed in an embroidered robe hobbled into view.

“Are you the Honorable Barton Skellers?” Cole asked.

“What’s left of him,” the old man said with a grin. His frail voice matched his appearance. “High priority message?”

“I guess you’ll be the judge,” Cole said.

“The canister, boy,” the old man said. “And the seal. Are you new?”

“Yes, sir,” Cole apologized, handing over the cylinder.

Barton produced a small knife, broke the seal, and opened the cylinder. He pulled out a parchment, unrolled it, scanned it, then stared at Cole. “I wondered if we would get another messenger. Word has it the resistance in Zeropolis has suffered of late.”

“It hasn’t been good,” Cole said.

Barton rolled the scroll and returned it to the cylinder. “I need to place my seal on this, then you can deliver it to the queen.” He stepped close to Cole and lowered his voice. “Watch yourself, lad. These are perilous times. The High King has been erratic lately. Some might say paranoid. And Owandell has seldom been more active.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Cole said. “I’ll be careful.”

Moving in slow motion, the chamberlain left the room and came back with the cylinder newly sealed. “Do you know where to find Queen Harmony?”

“Not exactly,” Cole admitted.

The chamberlain explained the route. It didn’t sound too complicated. Only a couple of turns and a long set of stairs. “My seal should get you past all the checkpoints. The canister is marked high urgency. Other markings specify that it must pass directly from your hands to hers. You’ll get your chance to verbally deliver the actual message.”

“Thank you, sir,” Cole said, using his best manners.

“A minor service,” the chamberlain said. “I wish I could do more for her. She has never been more in need of allies, and they have never been scarcer. Take care.”

Cole exited and followed the instructions. The guards he encountered kept letting him pass, until he was admitted to a door at the base of a tower.

Beyond the door he entered a sumptuous room, where a shriveled woman in a flashy uniform greeted him. Despite her aged appearance, she moved energetically and had a youthful voice. “Greetings, boy,” she said. “I see you have a message for Her Majesty. Please wait as I inquire as to her availability.”

As the woman exited the room, Cole sat down on a sofa with cushions deeper and softer than most mattresses. He wondered if anybody at the First Castle answered their own door. He also wondered why there were so many guards. It seemed like the high walls and the guardsmen who manned them would keep out intruders. The number of guards inside the castle made him suspect that part of their purpose was to protect their masters from one another.

The shriveled woman returned. "Her Majesty will see you."

It took Cole three tries to rock forward and get up from the comfy sofa. He could hardly believe he had accessed the queen so easily! Having him play a messenger boy had been a smart idea. He followed the woman out a door, up a winding stone staircase, and into a luxurious living room where Queen Harmony stood.

The queen looked older than she had in Trillian's contest, but not nearly sixty years older. She was still tall and graceful, but white streaks had crept into her auburn hair, and worry lines were visible on her lovely face. Her large eyes looked lively and knowing in a way Trillian had failed to replicate. The queen wore a black dress with a blue sash, elegant in its simplicity.

Cole bowed and waited for her to speak.

"You may approach," she said, holding out a hand.

Cole walked to her and handed over the cylinder. The queen held it while the older woman broke the seal and opened the canister. The woman backed away as the queen unrolled the parchment inside.

It was subtle, but after a moment Cole noticed Queen Harmony grip the parchment more tightly. Her striking eyes returned to Cole with new interest. "Sophie, leave us. I would converse with this messenger in private."



## CHAPTER

# 25

## HARMONY

The door closed, leaving Cole alone with the queen.

“Have you news of my daughters?” she whispered.

For a moment Cole found it hard to speak. This was the queen of the entire Outskirts—all five kingdoms and Junction. When he had entered, she had regarded him with an effortlessly regal air and commanded her servant with the nonchalance of somebody accustomed to being obeyed. But suddenly she looked vulnerable.

And she was waiting.

“I’ve been with Mira since the Sky Raiders,” Cole said, noting how the queen’s expression brightened at the news. “I left her in Old Zeropolis this morning. Googol and Nova are watching over her.”

“She is well?” Harmony asked.

“She’s not hurt or anything,” Cole said. “It hasn’t been easy, though.”

Harmony gave a slight nod. “Come closer.”

Cole obeyed. Because of the queen’s height, her proximity forced him to tilt his head back to retain eye contact. She stared down at him pensively.

“You were a Sky Raider?” she asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Cole said.

“Tell me your name.”

“Cole, Your Majesty.”

“How did you meet my daughter?”

“She showed me around when I arrived there. Later I saved her life from a giant cyclops. When the legionnaires came for her, we ran away with a couple of other kids.”

“Mira was near Honor for a time,” Harmony said.

“That’s right,” Cole said. “Now Honor has gone looking for Destiny, and Mira is hunting for Constance.”

“So it would seem,” Harmony said. “Come sit with me.”

Cole and Harmony sat down on a pair of ornate armchairs that faced each other at angles. The scantily cushioned seat wasn’t very comfortable. It seemed designed with the purpose of keeping his posture upright.

“You were a Sky Raider but you bear a freemark,” Harmony said.

“The Grand Shaper Declan changed it,” Cole said.

“You’ve met with Declan?” she replied, showing real surprise. “He’s alive?”

“I saw him not too long ago,” Cole said. “He’s old, but alive.”

“Where did you find him?” Harmony asked. “Do you know how I can reach him?”

“He was behind the Eastern Cloudwall near the Brink,” Cole said. “When we found him, the legionnaires did too. Declan got away, but he left after we did, so I don’t know where he’s hiding now.”

“I see that you’re from Outside,” Harmony said.

“How can you tell?” Cole asked.

“We all have our gifts.”

“A type of shaping?”

“Similar to how I can sense where in the five kingdoms my daughters dwell,” Harmony said. “How did you come to the Outskirts?”

“A bunch of kids in my neighborhood were brought here as slaves,” Cole said. “I tried to help them but got captured too.”

“How much do you know about the state of affairs in the kingdoms?” Harmony asked.

“I know some things,” Cole said.

“Enlighten me,” she invited.

Cole figured that if he could trust anyone in the Outskirts, he could trust Queen Harmony. She wanted her daughters safe, and he was firmly on Mira’s side. He explained about their confrontation with Carnag and how Mira got her power back. He told about Quima and the threats she had made about

Stafford's shapecraft experiments. He recounted how they had rescued Honor from Trillian and how they had defeated Morgassa with the help of the Rogue Knight. He related how Honor got her power back and mentioned finding his friend Dalton. Finally he caught her up about the recent troubles in Zeropolis.

"You're an impressive youth," Harmony said. "You have my deepest thanks for the loyalty you have shown my daughters. Tell me about your power."

Cole had left out the role of his ability in the fight against Morgassa. "I was able to energize objects from Sambria so they would work in Elloweer," he said.

"Interesting," Harmony said, drawing out the word. "Very unusual."

"I'm not sure what else I can do. My power is blocked."

"I can sense that, too. A tangled barrier of dark energy lies between you and your talent. I've seldom seen such a vicious abuse of shapecraft."

Cole explained how his power had helped defeat Morgassa and how she had used her shapecraft on him before she died. "I still can't reach my power," Cole said. "I lost it just when I was starting to understand how to use it."

"We spend our lives learning to better access our abilities," Harmony said. "I'm sure there is much more I could do if only I could comprehend what is possible."

"Is there a way I can fix what happened?" Cole asked. "Get my power back?"

Harmony stared broodingly—not into his eyes, or even at his body, but all around him. He could tell she was searching for an answer to his question, but it was hard to guess what exactly she was seeing.

"Difficult," Harmony said. "The damage is too convoluted for another shapecrafter to unravel, even if we could find someone willing to help you. And it would probably take years for you to restore the connection yourself. Maybe a lifetime. Maybe longer. I'm sorry that I can't give you better news."

"I'll keep trying," Cole said. "What about your power? Can you see your daughters whenever you want?"

She winced a little. "I don't exactly see them. I can feel their location. I can sense their distress at times. Not much more than that."

"But you know the locations well enough to mark them," Cole observed.

“Yes,” Harmony agreed. “That I can do.”

“Could you place a star over Constance for us?” Cole asked. “The Unseen are in big trouble in Zeropolis. Googol and Nova are worried that if they don’t move quickly to get Constance, there might not be enough of a resistance movement left to help her.”

“There is little need for me to place a star above Constance,” Harmony said quietly, her eyes gazing off into space. “I can tell you her exact location. She has resided in the same place for years.”

“She’s safe?” Cole asked.

“Oh, no,” Harmony said. “Far from it. She’s in the hands of our most feared enemy in Zeropolis—Abram Trench.”

“The Grand Shaper has her?” Cole exclaimed.

Harmony nodded. “He holds her at his secret base. He’s had her for a long time. He knows her political value, so she has his protection as long as she remains useful to him. He was appointed by my husband but he is not a true ally. Her danger grows as my husband loses influence.”

“He’s losing his abilities, right?” Cole asked. “Stafford? The king?”

Harmony glanced around nervously. “The powers he stole, yes. This tower has centuries of shaped defenses designed to prevent prying eyes and curious ears from spying here. But one place in this tower is safer than the rest. Walk with me. I will share some secrets, and I have a request.”

Cole stood, and the queen did as well. Harmony led him out of the room and into a staircase that wound up and up. They passed a few doors until the stairs stopped at a final portal. Harmony produced a key, spoke what sounded like a nonsense word, and opened the door.

She stepped out onto a balcony that surrounded the top of the tower. A final turret rose above it, with a steep conical room and a flag. A breeze that Cole hadn’t felt down below ruffled his hair, prompting him to pull his jacket tighter.

Following Harmony and looking around, Cole found he was on the highest platform of the tallest tower in the First Castle. The buildings of the city seemed like tiny playthings from this lofty vantage. Looking outward, he could see a living map of hills and forests, rivers and plains.

“What a view!” Cole exclaimed.

She closed the door. “This is where I come to place my stars.”

“How does that work?” Cole asked. “Are they illusions?”

Harmony frowned upward. “Our entire sky is little more than an illusion. I’ve studied it for years, but I still fail to understand it. I believe we borrow the skies of other worlds.”

“How can you borrow an entire sky?” Cole asked.

“How is anything done here?” Harmony replied. “Shaping. From what I can tell, our world is unlike any other. Most worlds are spheres surrounded by vast reaches of space. The Outskirts mimic the sky of such a world, without having discernible spherical properties.”

“This world isn’t round?” Cole asked.

“Not that I can tell,” Harmony said. “I have come to this balcony every night for many years.”

“It doesn’t seem very secretive,” Cole said, hoping he wasn’t giving offense. “Can’t half the castle see us?”

“It would seem so,” Harmony said. “But no. If you look up from below, this balcony is not visible, let alone any people on it.”

“Shaping?” Cole asked.

“Very old and very powerful shaping,” Harmony said. “It takes great power to make shapings last in Junction.”

“What if the High King comes up here?”

Harmony laughed bitterly. “Stafford has his tower. I have mine. We haven’t lived in the same rooms since he staged the deaths of our daughters. He thinks I parted with him out of grief. In a way, I suppose I did. He still doesn’t know I helped the girls escape.”

“Are the powers he took mostly gone now?” Cole asked.

“By your account, he must have completely lost the abilities he stole from Honor and Miracle. It fits what I have sensed. His other stolen powers have significantly dwindled. The full extent of the atrophy is hard to pinpoint—it’s difficult to get a clear read on him. He has become increasingly reclusive. And ever more paranoid. These are bad times to earn my husband’s attention. His judgments are harsher than usual, and occasionally irrational.”

“That’s no fun,” Cole said.

“Not all of his fears are unfounded,” Harmony said. “Losing his powers does make him more vulnerable. Especially when he must deal with a truly sinister threat within the walls of his own castle.”

“Owandell?” Cole asked.

Harmony shivered. “Some refer to him as the Overseer. Bolder observers

call him the Knave. Stafford has only himself to blame. He invited Owandell into his inner circle. The Knave introduced my husband to the possibilities offered by shapecraft. He helped Stafford in all of his schemes, including taking our daughters' abilities. Over time, Stafford granted him greater political clout, much of it behind the scenes. Owandell moved from serving as an adviser and conspirator to personally controlling many important aspects of governance. By the time Stafford realized the danger, Owandell was in too strong a position to remove. His influence continued to grow without my husband's help, and sometimes even directly against his wishes. The Knave now heads the Enforcers and his own enormous network of spies."

"Does he want to take over?" Cole asked.

"There is no doubt in my mind," Harmony said. "Stafford is far from an ideal king, but the Knave would be much worse. He is more ruthless, more cunning, and only he knows the limits of what he can accomplish with shapecraft."

"You want to help Stafford?" Cole asked.

"Against the Knave? Yes, for the good of all, I would take Stafford over Owandell. It's a delicate game. Aside from hiding my daughters, I have supported Stafford in every way. For their good and safety, I needed to stay close to him, and stay alive. But I am not my husband's ally. I would gladly see him fall if it means putting one of my children on the throne. That day is what I have lived for."

"But the Knave is in the way," Cole said.

"I shouldn't let you get accustomed to using that name," Harmony apologized. "If the wrong ears hear you use it, you'd disappear. Stick to the Overseer. But, yes, he is in the way. I fear that nobody can save Stafford from him at this point."

"Should your daughters stay in hiding?"

"If possible," Harmony said. "I fear the days of hiding are past. Since the Knave has taken up the hunt, my daughters have been fending for their lives. It's only a matter of time before he tracks them down, whether or not he sits on the throne."

"Then what should we do?" Cole asked.

Harmony gave him a long stare. Her hand found his shoulder and rested there. The regret in her eyes made him uneasy.

"I must ask a favor of you," Harmony said.

“What?”

“I know of a secret meeting tomorrow,” Harmony said. “A gathering of elite Enforcers and expert spies. Owandell will conduct the meeting. He is on the brink of finally making his real bid for power. The signs are all there. The timing is right. This meeting could reveal much about his intentions.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “What’s the favor?”

She gave his shoulder a squeeze. “You must attend the meeting in disguise.”

Cole almost gagged. “Isn’t this the guy you were just warning me to stay away from? Including not using the wrong nickname?”

“Everyone will be in disguise,” Harmony said. “The Knave can’t afford to let his top spies identify one another.”

“Don’t you have your own spies?” Cole asked. “People with more experience?”

“I did,” Harmony said. “Lately many have gone missing. None remain whom I can trust with this. I considered going myself, but my powers are unusual, and Owandell is familiar with them. He would almost certainly sense me.”

“Aren’t my powers unusual?” Cole asked.

“They are, but they are deeply scarred by shapecraft,” Harmony said. “Many of the Enforcers are shapecrafters who have tampered with their abilities. Some of them are even young like you. Unless Owandell pays you very special attention, you should blend in.”

“And if I don’t blend?” Cole asked.

Harmony released his shoulder. “Owandell will not be gentle. He will want information, and he will undoubtedly experiment on your unusual abilities, blocked or not. After much suffering, you would probably pay with your life.”

“I get the feeling you’ve never worked in sales,” Cole said.

“You deserve to know the truth,” Harmony said.

“How did you find out about the meeting?” Cole wondered.

Harmony’s lips bent toward a grin. “I sometimes see visions of the future. I can’t usually force or control them. This one was quite clear. Owandell would have no reason to suspect anyone could know about his gathering. I know where you should go, what invitation you should carry, and what costume

you should wear. All can be arranged. If you stay calm and hold your tongue, you should succeed.”

“Why do I need to go if you already saw a vision?” Cole asked.

“I heard nothing,” Harmony explained. “But I saw the meeting vividly, lit by torches and candles deep below the castle, near the Founding Stone. I can provide instructions.”

“What about everybody else if I blow it?” Cole said. “What about Constance and Miracle? What about my friends who were kidnapped?”

“If you get caught, you don’t know enough to cause my daughters serious harm. But don’t get caught.”

“I need to know this is worth it,” Cole said. “I want to help Mira. I want to help my enslaved friends. I need to know you’ll tell me how to find Constance.”

Harmony regarded Cole somberly. “I have left Constance where she is for a reason. Abram Trench knows her value, and will protect her from both Stafford and Owandell. But with her powers unstable, who knows how else he might try to use her? And considering the showdown that I expect between Stafford and Owandell, who knows how long Abram can keep her safe? Should Owandell rise to power, after he disposes of Stafford and me, his next target will be the Grand Shaper of Zeropolis.”

“So you’ll tell me how to find Constance?” Cole asked.

Harmony nodded. “I am out of trusted messengers. If you fulfill this assignment for me, I will tell you the exact location of Abram’s secret base where Constance is being held, and I will help you secure passage back to Zeropolis. Furthermore, if I can remain in power, I will see to it that all of your friends who were taken from Earth with you are found and restored to their freedom.”

For a moment Cole was speechless. “It’s more than I could have hoped,” he finally managed.

“Before I can help your friends, I’ll need to survive the upcoming coup attempt by Owandell. Given the recent activities of the Knave and his shapecrafters, I’m not sure how much longer my reign will last.”

“It’s good enough to know you’ll help if you can,” Cole said. “Is there any chance of us getting home and staying there?”

“I know of no way,” Harmony said. “My abilities combine some aspects of the shaping found in Necronum, Creon, and Elloweer. I have studied the



physical aspects of the Outskirts my whole life, and have found no way for those who come here to permanently return to any of the outside worlds. It would require changing how this world connects to the others.”

Cole didn't like her answer. It reinforced what so many others had told him—that getting home would be difficult, if not impossible. “Could I ask one more favor?”

“You may ask,” Harmony said.

“One of the friends I lost is named Jenna Hunt,” Cole said. “She came here after she was taken, but I don't know where she was sent as a slave. Could you find out?”

“One does not ordinarily bargain with royalty,” Harmony said. “But if you help me, I will try. Does this mean you will infiltrate the meeting?”

Cole braced himself. “Yes.” The word was easy to say, but he knew the commitment would lead to lots of stress and danger. “Queen Harmony, you said you don't have trusted servants to send. Why trust me?”

“One of my talents is reading people,” she said. “Not just mannerisms and intonations. I can see more deeply than most. Some people are easier to read than others. Parts of you are crystal clear. Everything you told me about helping my daughters was true. Your desire to help your friends is sincere. More than any current servant I can name, I know you're on my side.”

“You really lucked out,” Cole said. “A kid with messed-up powers.”

“No,” Harmony said gravely. “A young hero who has survived much hardship. I'll be honored to include you among my private errand boys. I will not see you again until after the gathering. Sophie will take care of the details. Watch for my instructions tomorrow afternoon.”

## CHAPTER

# 26

## SIDETRACKED

**W**ithin an hour of his arrival, none of the other royal errand boys would so much as smile at Cole, no matter how friendly he acted. It did not take long for him to figure out that these boys had spent their lives working smart and hard to earn their positions, and they had no respect for a kid who showed up out of nowhere.

Cole hadn't tried to make up a history for himself. The more fake details he gave, the more he would set himself up to get caught in a lie. He just mysteriously told the boys who asked that he had connections. At first some seemed to think he might belong to a powerful family, but when he refused to tell where he was from or reveal anything about his background, they soon lost interest.

The errand boys serving the king and queen shared a mess hall but had separate sleeping quarters. The king had about fifty boys, the queen thirty. At first the high numbers had surprised Cole, until he considered how many messages a king and queen might have to send while governing a kingdom. This wasn't Zeropolis. They didn't have communicators.

During the first day among them, Cole eavesdropped as best he could. He heard some of the boys griping that they weren't used as much lately because of all the secret messages being delivered by soldiers or other agents. A few of the boys expressed uneasiness about working directly with the High King, since his moods had apparently been unpredictable lately.

Nobody sat with Cole at dinner. That was fine with him. He only expected to be an errand boy for a day or two, and then he would flee Junction with highly sensitive information. The less people who noticed him the better.

The next day the Chief Boy summoned Cole to his room. After receiving a brief orientation from the Chief Boy the day before, Cole still didn't know his name.

The Chief Boy had to be almost fifteen. He was tall and stuffy-looking with a prominent nose and watery, unimpressed eyes. Cole figured that on his next birthday, the kid would have to find a new job.

"I found out about you," the Chief Boy said.

A sharp stab of worry pierced Cole. "What do you mean?"

"Your arrival smelled funny. We had orders to add you to our ranks on short notice and without the proper references. Now I understand. You were brought in to deliver a particular message."

"Maybe," Cole said, relieved that the kid seemed not to know the whole truth.

"I'm not trying to discover the message. That goes against all we stand for as errand boys. This sort of arrangement happens on occasion. Sometimes the nature of a particular message calls for a certain hand to deliver it."

"That's the idea," Cole said. "I'm Rod, by the way." It was the alias agreed upon with Queen Harmony.

"Harold," the boy said. "You can't imagine how thrilled I am to babysit you. I'm told this message will be relayed in the dark of night. I'll show you what door to use. The late-night messages usually deal with romantic matters, but it isn't my place to speculate." His intonation suggested he wanted Cole's opinion.

"I don't know either," Cole said.

Harold rolled his eyes. "Formally we never know anything," he said. "But it doesn't take too many clues to make guesses."

"I'll watch for clues," Cole said. "Is that all?"

"One more matter," Harold said. "I report to the king. All errand boys owe their ultimate loyalty to him. I informed him about you and your errand, and he would like to meet with you before you carry out your assignment."

Cole went rigid. "Isn't this a matter for him and the queen to talk about?"

"The king seldom interacts with her directly," Harold said. "But he likes to

learn what he can. He has been extra cautious lately. He specifically asked for word of any suspicious messages. That includes suspicious messengers.”

“I’m just doing a job,” Cole said.

“A job for the queen,” Harold said. “I must ask you to come with me.”

“Now?” Cole asked.

“The king thought it wise to leave you without time to prepare yourself,” Harold said. “Will you come willingly, or should I summon the guards?”

“I’ll come,” Cole said.

Harold stood. “This way.”

Cole followed him out of the room. As they left the errand-boy quarters and moved through the castle halls, Cole considered making a run for it. But how would he get away from Harold and the guards who chased him? And even if he gave them the slip, how would he attend the meeting tonight? People might have suspicions about him, but nobody really knew anything yet. Running would just make him look guilty.

They passed several guards. Everyone seemed to know Harold and let him pass without question. Finally they went through an iron door into a tower. A pair of large guards confronted them in an opulent room.

“His Majesty expects to interview this boy,” Harold said.

“Very well,” one of the guards responded. He proceeded to thoroughly pat down Cole, checking his coat and pockets, probing into his shoes, and feeling his arms and legs. “You’re boring.”

“Thank you?” Cole responded.

“A good trait under the circumstances,” the guard said. “Come with me.”

Harold and the other guard stayed behind as Cole was led up a flight of stairs and through a door. Inside he found the High King pacing, a crown on his head and a scowl on his face.

Cole had seen an imitation of Stafford when they fought Carnag, and also at the Lost Palace. A man of average height, his dark, neatly trimmed hair had more gray in it than Cole recalled. His face was different in subtle ways—the cheeks more hollow, the eyes shadowed and slightly bloodshot, the skin grayer. His clothes, though fine, had a rumpled look, as if he might have spent the night in them.

“The new errand boy?” Stafford asked, sizing up Cole.

“Yes,” the guard replied. “Would you like me to remain?”

“Linger outside the door,” Stafford said.

The guard immediately exited and shut the door. Cole waited in silence, watching Stafford in disbelief. There he was. Mira's father. The man who made slavery legal in the Outskirts. The man who had stolen his daughters' powers and staged their deaths. The man who had bought so many of his friends. The man who planned to experiment on some or all of those friends using shapecraft. The man the resistance sought to overthrow.

"Tell me your name," Stafford said, in a dry, no-nonsense voice.

"Rod," Cole said.

"What is the nature of the message my wife commissioned you to deliver?"

The blunt nature of the question left Cole momentarily at a loss. So much for small talk!

"Don't make up a lie," Stafford demanded. "I am your king. Tell me the nature of the message!"

"I don't know, Your Majesty," Cole said, not needing to pretend to sound scared.

"You know something," Stafford said, eyes narrowing.

"I think it has to do with some of Owandell's followers," Cole said, which was true, if not the whole truth.

"Has she placed a spy among his people?" Stafford asked, his voice softer and a little hopeful.

"I guess so," Cole said. "This is my first time working for her."

Stafford squinted suspiciously. "And why would that be? How did she recruit you?"

Cole thought it would be best to stay as close to the truth as possible. "I was delivering a message from the chamberlain to Queen Harmony."

"How long have you been an errand boy?"

"It was my first delivery," Cole said.

Stafford stroked his chin, rings glittering. "She saw something in you. Some hint of promise. Something she liked. She does that at times."

"She told me she could trust me," Cole said.

"Which I expect is true," Stafford said. "She has genuine ability in discerning such matters. But why? You must be an honest lad. Are you honest?"

"I do my best," Cole said.

"That was not a straight answer," Stafford said. "Maybe not so honest. Maybe adept at avoiding lies."

“I’m honest.”

“Do not engage in wordplay with your king, boy. I prefer straight talk.”

“Okay.”

“She probably liked that you were new to the job. No allegiances anywhere. You’ve had no opportunity to be corrupted. Have you ever consorted with Owandell or his folk?”

“No, sire,” Cole said.

“I believe you,” Stafford said. “You don’t seem dull. A dim-witted errand boy can be useful in some cases. Have you a family?”

“Nobody,” Cole said. The answer felt painfully close to the truth these days.

“Expendable,” Stafford said. “A very useful trait. Too many royal errand boys have one connection or another. Very well. Deliver your message. Do not inform my wife that we spoke. After your message has been delivered, return to me. Harold will see to it.”

“All right,” Cole said.

Stafford licked his lips. “These are treacherous times. When things seem out of place, pay attention. Dismiss no suspicions. Trust slowly. Bring me good information and you will be rewarded.”

“Is that fair to the queen?” Cole asked.

Stafford began to repeatedly tap his forefinger against each finger of the opposite hand. “Do not read her message. Do not betray your trust. But do not forget who is your king, and king of every person you know. My wife is free to conduct her intrigues. She has served our interests well over the years. I want the information you gain with your own eyes and ears as you conduct the delivery. I am, after all, husband to the queen and High King of the Outskirts.”

“I’ll do my best,” Cole said.

The king pressed his fingertips together. “Very well.” He started coughing, softly at first, but it got louder, until he was doubled over making choking sounds.

For a terrible instant Cole thought the king might drop dead in front of him. Had he been poisoned or something?

The coughing fit finally subsided, and the king spat into a handkerchief. As he wiped a tear from his cheek, his hand trembled a little.

“Are you all right?” Cole asked.

“A minor agitation,” Stafford said. “No words about that to anyone, understand?”

“Yes, sire.”

“That was not the hacking of an ill man,” Stafford explained. “It was the reaction of a robust man with too much dust in his chamber.”

“Sure,” Cole said.

Stafford narrowed his gaze. “Are you staring at me?”

“I’m just looking at you,” Cole said, feeling off-balance.

“Looking at what?” the king asked. “Looking on whose behalf?”

“You called me here and I came,” Cole said.

“So you did,” Stafford said, seeming calmer. “Are you ever lonely, boy?”

“Sometimes,” Cole said.

“Try wearing a crown. The nights are long. Forget the pulmonary insubordination. I did not cough. There are enough stories circulating about me. I will see you tomorrow, after your delivery. Serve me well and the possibilities are endless.”

“Thank you, sire.”

“Off with you,” Stafford said. “Go rap on the door.”

The guard opened the door and escorted Cole back to Harold. As Cole walked back to the errand-boy quarters, he wondered if he would manage to leave Junction before Stafford sought a report from him. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

## CHAPTER

# 27

## GATHERING

Cole slipped out the side door of the errand-boy quarters five and a half hours after sundown. He wore a brown robe with the hood up and a strip of black fabric wound around his face just below the eyes. The material made his breathing stuffy, but air was getting through, so it felt like a small price to pay to become unrecognizable.

The costume had been delivered by Harmony's elderly servant Sophie late in the afternoon, along with written instructions and a carved ivory rose meant to prove he had been invited. Everything was bundled inside of a leather messenger bag that had earned envious stares from some of the other boys.

Cole had left the bag in his room. It would go to whoever claimed it. After the gathering, the instructions called for Cole to report directly to Harmony's tower, regardless of the hour. He would share his information and hopefully be smuggled away before sunrise.

All of that assuming Owandell didn't catch him.

As Cole walked away from the errand-boy quarters, he felt confident that nobody had seen him leave. Each boy had their own small bedroom, and the common area had been empty.

The castle halls were quiet and shadowy. Dim globes on the walls provided enough light to see. Cole wondered what type of shaping powered the globes.

At the next intersection Cole glanced down at the directions in his hands. He needed to make his way to Owandell's tower, which involved a few



stairways and lots of turns. Around the next corner Cole saw a guard. He kept walking, trying to act comfortable, although he felt very conspicuous sneaking around in the night with his face hidden by a hooded robe. But his instructions had assured him that if he stuck to the specified route, the guards he met would let him pass.

Although Cole walked right past the guard in an otherwise empty hall, he received no special attention. He continued onward, and the silent guard remained at his post.

After some time Cole reached a guard not wearing the First Castle uniform. He was dressed like an Enforcer. The guard gave him a nod but made no attempt to engage him. All of the guards from that point on were Enforcers.

As Cole neared Owandell's tower, he met another person in a monk's robe with his face covered. The stranger walked a few steps behind Cole, going the same direction. The new presence made Cole tense, heightening the feeling of being an imposter and a trespasser. The stranger's robes matched the style he had seen Owandell wearing at the Lost Palace. The disguised person was considerably taller than Cole but otherwise could be anyone, including a shapecrafter, a spy, or Owandell himself.

After Cole took a couple of turns, it became clear that he and the stranger were heading for the same destination. He tried to stay calm as he neared an iron door at the base of a tower flanked by six Enforcers. They admitted two other robed figures before Cole arrived.

"Your token?" one of the Enforcers asked.

Cole held out the rose.

"Yours?" the guard asked looking behind Cole.

The man behind Cole displayed an ivory rose of his own. One of the Enforcers opened the door and waved Cole and the other man through.

On the other side of the door, a short woman clad in black took Cole's hand and led him to a corner of the room. She had expressive eyes, but a veil hid the rest of her face. A bald man in a porcelain mask pulled aside the person who had followed Cole, directing him to another corner.

The woman held up a hand, palm outward. "May I?"

Cole had no idea what she intended but decided he had better play along. He gave a nod.

The woman pressed her palm to his chest. For a moment Cole's vision

darkened, and all of the energy inside of him was pulled toward her hand. His internal regions folded and shrank as a bizarre suction drew his thoughts, his power, and maybe even his soul toward her touch.

She yanked her palm away, and the disorienting rush ended. Everything inside of him snapped back into place, and his vision cleared.

The woman stared at him with wide eyes. “Thank you for your service. You are heavily scarred for one so young.”

Cole nodded.

“Show me the token,” she invited.

Cole held out the ivory rose. The woman placed both of her hands over his, and the rose turned black.

The woman leaned close. “I’m not supposed to be curious tonight, but I can’t help myself. Your power is interesting. Was the extreme mutilation necessary to produce it?”

“Partly,” Cole murmured, trying to be vague.

“So many fascinating people have gathered tonight,” she said. “This way.”

She escorted Cole out of the room and to the top of a staircase. An Enforcer handed her a small torch, which she passed to Cole.

“Enjoy the service,” she said.

Black rose in one hand, torch in the other, Cole started down the curving stairs. Maybe it was the torchlight, or the new chill in the air, but this part of the castle looked more ancient than the rest. The stones of the walls and floors were larger and rougher, jammed together without visible mortar. The deeper he went, the less even the stairs became. The stairway began to meander, sometimes curving to the left, other times to the right. The steps unpredictably became steeper or shallower. Moisture glistened on the walls, and the temperature plunged.

Cole slowed, taking care as the stone stairs became more craggy and damaged. He kept expecting to reach the bottom, and that kept not happening. His torch began to burn greener, first subtly, then unmistakably. The air felt thicker, almost liquid, as if a different type of atmosphere had pooled down here in the darkness. He could still breathe fine, but his lungs needed to squeeze a little harder.

At last he reached the bottom, and a short hall led through a malformed archway into a cavernous room. More than a hundred robed figures had congregated there, each holding a greenish torch. Several of them were short

enough to be kids. Emerald bonfires blazed in cauldrons, and against the fractured walls, drippy candles burned in contorted candelabras.

The robed figures stood apart from one another. Nobody conversed. Cole found an empty place to stand. The others all faced a large stone block in the center of the room, gray and smooth with slightly rounded corners. Cole stared at it as well. Was it just that everyone was gazing at it, or did the block have an unusual presence?

As time passed, other robed figures trickled into the room. Cole held the torch closer to his face to ward off the chill. Eventually new people stopped arriving.

One of the robed figures mounted the stone block. Casting back his hood, he unwrapped his face.

It was Owandell. Greenish firelight reflected off his hairless scalp. His fleshy, ageless face looked just how Cole remembered him from the Lost Palace, though his build now looked a little more rotund.

Owandell raised both hands as if to quiet the crowd, even though nobody was making any noise. Then a voice penetrated Cole's mind. Owandell's lips weren't moving, but the words came across loud and clear.

*Welcome, fellow servants of Nazeem. I am honored by your presence. We gather together as the true believers, the living heart of our movement, excusing those on assignment abroad. I thank you for attending.*

Cole glanced around. The other robed people near him gazed raptly at Owandell. Cole assumed they all heard him as well.

*How appropriate that we gather at the Founding Stone. He stomped one foot to show he meant the block on which he stood. Most believe the name refers to this being the first stone of the First Castle. The actual meaning reaches back further. This is in fact the first stone of the Outskirts, and marks the original junction between the five kingdoms. This stone set the pattern. The material of this world expanded outward from this point, enabling mortals to dwell here.*

Owandell raised both of his hands high. *It remains a nexus of great power. He closed his eyes. As Nazeem teaches, all shaping power is one, and that power abounds near this historic cornerstone.*

"Nazeem!" cried one of the robed onlookers.

The flames in the room leaped higher and burned greener, including the fire of the torch Cole held. The unexpected flare up nearly startled him into dropping it.

“Nazeem! Nazeem!” called several voices.

Cole didn't take up the cry. He wasn't always the best at sensing shaping power, but he could feel wave after wave pulsing from the Founding Stone.

Owandell lowered his hands, and the flames returned to normal. *I bring you word from the Fallen Temple. Nazeem sees progress in our shapecraft. He knows of our failures as well. We must improve our techniques and hasten our efforts. The hour of his return draws nigh.*

The robed crowd cheered, waving their black roses above their heads. Cole waved his as well.

*Ours is an ancient brotherhood, Owandell continued. Long have we nurtured our craft. Long have we bided our time. We have dwelt in the shadows, practicing our art in secret, forbidden to utter our master's name. While other shapers skimmed the surface, we dove deep, and will plunge deeper still. Our exile will soon end. Nazeem's return is at hand. All will revere his name and bow to those who serve him.*

A greater cheer went up from the hooded assemblage. Some fell to their knees. Others beat their chests. Wondering what he had gotten himself into, Cole waved his rose and cheered, trying to blend in with the frenzy. Owandell paused until the excitement died down. As the room became more silent, Cole could hear a few people sobbing. This was more than people plotting. Was it some kind of cult? It was definitely weirder and more unsettling than he had expected.

*Even now, in this noble company, some doubt this promise. Even after mastering aspects of the art. Even after all the signs and marvels in recent years. Those who have visited the Fallen Temple do not doubt, but there is no longer time for all to make the pilgrimage before the appointed hour. As a reward for the faithful, and as a warning to the rest, with our help, Nazeem will extend his power beyond the Fallen Temple for the first time.*

No cheers accompanied this announcement, but there were many gasps. Cole had never heard of Nazeem, but he had a feeling he didn't want to meet him. He glanced at the archway through which he had entered. Could he slip out without being noticed? It didn't seem likely.

Owandell sprang down from the Founding Stone, took a torch from one of the other robed figures, and touched it to the ancient block. Green flames flickered across the surface until the entire block was ablaze.

Crouching down beside the block, Owandell laid a hand against the burning stone. Cole winced in sympathy, but the fire didn't spread to

Owandell's robes, nor did he appear to be in pain.

The flames atop the Founding Stone stretched higher and began to spin. As the whirlwind of fire increased in size and intensity, the other flames in the room dimmed. Cole's torch looked like it had spent its fuel and was about to expire.

A face took shape in the heart of the green whirlwind of fire, crude in form, like a simple mask. Startled and afraid, Cole watched the fiery visage with morbid fascination. The eyes burned brightly.

*Greetings, my loyal ones,* bellowed a much stronger voice. Cole not only heard the rumbling words in his mind, but felt them in his chest. The black rose vibrated in his grasp. *I am Nazeem. The time has come to set our final plans in motion. Before long I will walk among you, and we will remake this world to our liking. The best of you are still infants in shapecraft, but the day approaches when you will be empowered beyond your wildest fantasies.*

Cole closed his eyes. The raw power radiating from the Founding Stone was overwhelming. It called out to him on a fundamental level. Everything inside of him felt tugged toward it. Cole realized that he could perceive his own power for the first time since Morgassa had raised her barriers. He tried to use it and found he couldn't draw from it. But at least he could sense it.

*I congratulate you on your progress,* Nazeem went on. *Now is the time to stand tall and finish what we started generations ago. Who is with me?*

All around Cole, robed figures raised their roses high. Cole didn't want to join in. He didn't like Nazeem or the hate behind his words. He wanted to slip out and run for his life. But he raised his rose as well to avoid standing out.

The face inside the whirlwind scowled. Cole would have sworn those blazing eyes glared right at him. *What is this? A spy in our midst? His power is obscured by skillful shapecraft, but he is not one of us. A sheep in wolf's clothing. Tonight is not for the uninitiated. Speak your name, boy.*

Frozen with fear, Cole stared back at Nazeem's brilliant eyes. The robed figures around him twisted and turned, trying to identify the imposter. For the moment, only Cole had no doubt who Nazeem meant.

His options were limited. There was no running away. Enforcers guarded the top of the stairway, and at least a dozen robed figures stood between himself and the exit. His cover was blown. He was caught. What would they do with him? This was a nightmare.

*Your silence is unbecoming, Nazeem roared. I hereby revoke your token. Who will apprehend—*

The carved rose in Cole's hand shattered, and he could no longer hear Nazeem. The face still glared down from the flames, but that rumbling voice in his head was gone. The lost connection made the face seem more distant.

More robed figures moved to cover the exit. Cole pretended to look around for the traitor like all the other robed people. He knew Nazeem was still speaking, probably giving orders to capture him. The sensation of his power straining toward the Founding Stone redoubled. Cole had to lean away to avoid stumbling toward it.

*Come*, a gentle voice seemed to suggest. Not Nazeem's voice. This one he felt more than heard, almost as if it rose from his own power.

Cole had no options. Any second one of his enemies would figure out which person to grab. Since his power seemed attracted to the stone, Cole decided to head that way.

Running would draw attention, so Cole walked forward, weaving between the people in his way. The Founding Stone wasn't too far off. Most of the others were fanning out. They expected him to flee. Maybe Nazeem was telling them to cut off all escape. Nobody seemed concerned about guarding the stone.

The closer he got to the Founding Stone, the clearer the pull became. The robed figures covered their ears, and Cole could see that the face was yelling, but he heard nothing.

Three or four steps from the Founding Stone, Owandell lunged at Cole, his eyes enraged. Cole faked left, sprang right, ducked Owandell's grasping hands, and dove to the stone, pressing both hands against the smooth surface, heedless of the green flames.

## CHAPTER

# 28

## FOUNDING STONE

Suddenly Cole was alone with Nazeem. No longer a disembodied face veiled in flame, Nazeem looked human, and very displeased. Indistinct grayness surrounded them. Cole didn't understand where they were. He could still feel his hands against the stone, his power flowing freely into the huge block, so why didn't he see the block, or the other robed figures? All he saw was the dreamlike image of Nazeem gazing at him. This had to be in his mind.

*You!* Nazeem accused, darkening and shrinking, withdrawing as if falling, his voice no longer as commanding. *The intruder!*

*That's right,* Cole responded mentally, his confidence surging as Nazeem's influence dwindled. *Me!*

The vision of Nazeem vanished, and Cole could see again. His hands remained against the warm surface of the Founding Stone. The green flames had disappeared. The entire block gleamed an intense white.

Cole could still feel his power coursing into the stone, though not as vigorously as at first. Looking around, he found that all of the other green flames in the room were extinguished as well. The robed figures maintained motionless poses, bathed in the Founding Stone's white glare. Owandell was closest, his face distorted into a grimace, one hand outstretched. Despite his awkward posture, he stayed unnaturally still. He also looked somewhat transparent.

"Why did time stop?" Cole muttered to himself.

Nobody answered.

Beneath his palms, the Founding Stone thrummed with energy. Cole could clearly sense the shapecrafted barriers inside of himself, shadowy contrasts to the vibrant clarity of his power. Those obstructions didn't matter right now. His shaping energy flowed through them, hardly disturbed, like a flash flood gushing through a chain-link fence.

He had a deep suspicion that as soon as he released the stone, everything would return to normal. For some reason, his contact with the Founding Stone had paused everyone. No. That wasn't quite right. Nothing had happened to them. He had temporarily passed outside the reach of time. Cole couldn't explain how he knew that was true, but he felt certain.

Surveying the room, Cole realized that all the robed people were semitransparent. Wait, not just the people—the walls, too. He focused on the walls and ceiling, trying to peer through the stone. One wall seemed to conceal an indistinct chamber beyond, and Cole strained to make it out.

As he intensified his effort, the wall drew nearer. Or was he moving toward it? No, his hands remained on the Founding Stone. His vision had somehow disconnected from his body and journeyed across the room.

Experimenting with his detached vision, Cole found he could glide anywhere he chose, moving freely around the room, high or low. The sensation of motion without moving gave him vertigo, and Cole steadied himself against the block. After some time swooping around the area, Cole fixed his vision on himself kneeling beside the Founding Stone, palms against it. He could see the shaping energy inside his translucent body, cloudlike and churning, along with the dark tangles of the shapecrafted barriers.

Shifting his attention to Owandell, Cole could perceive his energy as well. It was darker, motionless, and had less shapecrafted snarls. Studying the others, he recognized different degrees of shaping energy inside all of the robed figures.

Cole noticed the deformed archway to the stairs and wondered how far his vision could roam. He coasted through the archway, glanced back at himself beside the Founding Stone, then started up the stairs. No torches lit the stairway, leaving it very dim, but he could still see enough detail to proceed, as if his vision carried a faint inherent light.

With a small effort of will, Cole found that he could go as fast as he wanted, so before long he reached the top. The heavy door was closed and slightly transparent. Cole pushed through it without any trouble and found



himself in the room at the base of the tower. He saw the woman who had held her palm to his chest, her energy sparkling inside of her.

Pressing ahead, Cole exited the tower and moved through the halls of the castle, occasionally passing Enforcers, then regular guardsmen. He knew where he wanted to go. After several wrong turns, he located the door to Harmony's tower and ghosted through it.

He rushed from one room to another in the tower. He found the queen's servant Sophie asleep in bed, but the other rooms were empty, including what had to be Harmony's bedroom. He wondered where she could be. Would he have to search the rest of the castle?

Then he remembered the balcony.

He flew up the stairs and through the door, and sure enough, there she stood, gazing up at the stars, her shaping energy bright within her. Cole hovered in front of her face. She was as motionless as everyone else. He called out to her, but the sound came from his mouth back in the room beneath Owandell's tower.

Cole eased in closer, until her face filled his view. He willed her to speak to him. He needed help!

Her expression didn't twitch. She was no livelier than a statue. Was there a way to snap her out of it?

Moving closer still, Cole's vision entered her head, and suddenly her energy filled his view, swirling and pulsing, no longer static. A strong sense of her presence enveloped him.

*Is that you, Cole?* he heard in his mind.

*It's me!* he replied excitedly.

*I hear you. I can't move. How are you doing this?*

*I'm not sure. I'm touching the Founding Stone.*

*What?* Her tone became distressed. *Are you alone?*

*Not exactly. Do you know about Nazeem?*

*Excuse me?*

*Nazeem. Some scary guy from the Fallen Temple.*

*I don't know what you're talking about.*

*He's Owandell's boss. They have a plan to take over the Outskirts. Nazeem has been imprisoned for a long time, but it sounds like he's about to get free. He was here tonight, kind of, using the Founding Stone as a communicator. He knew I was a spy. They were about to catch me. My power wanted me to go to the Founding Stone, so I*

*did. When I touched the stone, Nazeem went away, and everybody else froze, as if time stopped. You were frozen too, until we started talking.*

*The patterns of Harmony's energy became agitated for a moment. I still can't move. My body remains frozen. Somehow you freed my mind. This is incredible, Cole. Legend has it that the Founding Stone once wielded great power, but nobody has been able to use it in ages. Your ability must have revitalized it somehow.*

*Oh! You're right! That fits. It's what my ability does. But what now? I'm afraid if I let go of the stone, Owandell will capture me.*

*You're currently touching it?*

*Yes.*

*And the others are still immobile?*

*I can't see. My vision is with you. But I guess they're still frozen, because they're not grabbing me. Plus, you still can't move.*

*How did you get to me? Harmony wondered.*

*It was like my sight could fly around all of a sudden. I feel like I'm looking out of floating eyes. Except they can go through stuff like doors and people. I flew from under Owandell's tower to here.*

*How did you get past the protections on my tower?*

*I don't know. I didn't run into any.*

*Must be the Founding Stone.*

*Cole only wanted the stone's power to do one thing. Can I use it to escape somehow?*

*Maybe. Some powerful Wayminders can send their sight on missions. The most powerful can cross space to bring their bodies to the location of their sight.*

*Perfect! How can I do it?*

*That I cannot explain. You must learn from trial and error. See if the stone makes it possible.*

*Gritting his teeth, Cole willed his body to teleport to where his vision was. Nothing happened.*

*I'm trying, Cole told her. It isn't working.*

*As I understand it, you've never sent your sight roaming before?*

*No.*

*Then keep trying. Who knows what you're capable of with the stone boosting your abilities?*

*Pressing both hands more firmly against the stone, Cole reached for his own power, and visualized his body joining up with his sight. He backed his*

vision away from Harmony, once again seeing her face instead of the graceful pyrotechnics of her energy. Then he pushed with all his will.

His vision shattered into dizzying perspectives. He was rising and sinking, zooming north, west, east, and south, seeing all directions at once from multiple simultaneous vantages. In a kaleidoscopic overload he saw mountaintops and oceans, slumbering villages and busy insects, roots growing in the earth and stars in the sky.

For one explosive moment Cole seemed to glimpse everything. But it was far too much to absorb, and his endless viewpoints collapsed, frantically returning to the Founding Stone from all directions.

And then it was over.

Cole still knelt with both hands against the stone. He was aware of that much. Except now he was surrounded by whiteness. Before him stood an elderly man in an elegant maroon robe with gold trim. The stranger had white hair and a friendly face.

“There you are,” the man said warmly. “I’ve been trying to aid you. I wondered if you would find me.”

“This feels like we’re really talking,” Cole said.

“I thought it might seem more natural to you,” the man said. “I realize how new most of this feels. It must be disorienting. Do you understand who I am?”

“The Founding Stone?”

“Good try. Close. I’ll take it as a compliment. I’m a reflection of Dandalus, one of the original architects of this world. His chief task was to oversee the creation of the Founding Stone, and he put some of himself into it. I’m like a semblance, or a figment.”

“Where are we?” Cole asked.

“Your body is where it’s been since you touched the stone,” Dandalus said. “But your mind is now with me.”

Cole looked around. “Lots of white.”

“I quite like it,” Dandalus said. “For a long season I dreamed in the darkness.”

“Can you help me get out of here?” Cole asked.

“I believe so. It would only be right. After all, you aided me. The stone was being abused by lawless shaping. The intrusion aroused me from a long slumber. I knew your power could help, so I called out to you as best I could.

Once you lent me your energy, I was able to reject Nazeem and bring you out of the timestream.”

“I was seeing all over the castle. Like my eyes were traveling without me.”

“I helped free your sight. I wanted you to look into the Founding Stone, so you could find me. Instead you searched everywhere else! I could feel you wandering, and sensed your conversation with the queen. For a moment you saw as the stone sees. It shares a connection with all the material of this world. Your mind rejected the vision and your sight returned here. Welcome.”

“How can I escape?” Cole asked.

Dandalus scrunched his brow. “It has to be quick. Once you stop feeding me your energy, I’ll slip back into my slumber. And without my help, you won’t be able to access your power.”

“Can you fix what Morgassa did to me?” Cole asked. “She used shapecraft to keep me from my power.”

“Shapecraft,” Dandalus grumbled in disdain. “Not much craft to it. Raw shaping, I call it. Shaping without context. Too much of it will mean the end of all we organized.”

“Can you repair the damage?” Cole asked.

“I wish I could. Unfortunately, what was done to you doesn’t pertain to the order established by the Founding Stone. Even fortified by your power, altering what was done to you is beyond my ability. I can help your power sidestep the blockades, but only while I’m active.”

“How can you sleep?” Cole asked. “Don’t you hold the Outskirts together?”

Dandalus laughed. “No, my boy. That would be far too much power to concentrate in one place. This stone set the pattern for this world, and maintains a unique connection to all the material that follows the pattern, but it doesn’t sustain this world. The Founding Stone would not be easy to unmake, or to move for that matter, but the pattern is already firmly established. If the Founding Stone were destroyed, this world would persist.”

“What about Nazeem?” Cole asked. “Can you tell me anything about him?”

“Very little,” Dandalus said. “I just met him. He is shrouded in lawless shaping. He was reaching out to us from a place in Necronum that is also cloaked in what you call shapecraft. I assume he’s at the Fallen Temple they spoke about, but I can’t spy on his domain.”

“How do I fight lawless shaping?” Cole asked.

“That falls outside my understanding,” Dandalus apologized. “I labored to bring order to the shaping here. This stone symbolizes that effort.”

“You’re connected to this whole world?” Cole asked.

“Yes.”

“Can you help me find people?”

“Our present contact leaves your mind open to me. I can see some of the people you wish to locate. Jenna. Constance. Some of your other friends.”

“I came here from Outside with a bunch of kidnapped children.”

“Nobody is native to this world,” Dandalus said. “Some are born here, but trace their lines back far enough, and all come from Outside.”

“Can you find my friends?”

“This is a big world,” Dandalus said. “It would take some searching. You glimpsed how it feels to see it all at once. I can’t apprehend much that way either. I could explore a little at a time. So could you.”

“Send my sight out again?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Dandalus said. “But your power isn’t endless. This partnership could last a few hours, but eventually you won’t be able to continue powering the stone without rest.”

“Once that happens, Owandell will get me,” Cole said.

“You will return to the timestream, yes,” Dandalus said.

Cole sighed. “That probably isn’t enough time.”

“Do you know where to look?” Dandalus asked. “Our chances would improve if you can narrow down the search.”

“That’s the problem,” Cole said. “I have no idea where to start.”

Dandalus nodded. “Then perhaps the best I can do is help you get away. I should be able to send you anywhere in this world.”

“Should?” Cole asked. “You’re not sure?”

“Not entirely,” Dandalus admitted. “If it works, I can send you across the kingdom as easily as across the room. It’s a manipulation of space, similar to the opening of a way. Once you break contact with the stone, it will stop functioning. But the transfer is as close to instantaneous as it gets. I expect success.”

“Can you send me home to my world?” Cole asked.

“I’m sorry, but no. The Founding Stone has no influence there.”

Cole weighed his options. After how angry he had made Owandell, it

would be smart to go as far from Junction as possible. He could skip the trains and return to Old Zeropolis. But he would lack the key piece of information he came here for—Constance’s location.

“Can you send me to Queen Harmony?” Cole asked. “Where I just was?”

“On the balcony?” Dandalus verified.

“Yeah.”

“It’s no harder to send you farther,” Dandalus said. “Surely you know of more distant options.”

“I need information from Harmony,” Cole said.

“As you wish,” Dandalus said. “If I fail, the effort will break contact with the stone without sending you anywhere. Hurry and touch it again and I’ll pull you back out of the timestream.”

“Okay,” Cole said.

“Focus on the place you want me to send you,” Dandalus said. “Visualize it. Reach out for it with your mind. I’ll do the rest.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “One more question.”

“I know it. I see your mind. You hope there is a way for you to get home from this world they now call the Outskirts.”

“They can open ways,” Cole said. “But I want to get home and stay there. I want my family to remember me.”

“Those who come here are not meant to return. It wasn’t anything we framers established—it was part of the nature of this place from the beginning. In theory, any aspect of this world can be reshaped. But I don’t know how you would accomplish it. I believe it would be impossible without using lawless shaping, which in turn could jeopardize this world’s stability. My advice would be to settle for living here.”

“I’m not going to give up,” Cole said.

“I can see that. But my advice stands. Are you ready?”

Closing his eyes, Cole pictured the balcony where he had just spoken to Queen Harmony. Abruptly his power stopped flowing. He could no longer sense his ability, and the Founding Stone had disappeared.

## CHAPTER

# 29

## FUGITIVE

**“You did it!”** Harmony exclaimed.

Cole opened his eyes. Kneeling before the queen on her balcony, a starry sky above, he breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“I had some help,” Cole said, standing.

“I only offered encouragement,” Harmony said modestly.

“I appreciated it,” Cole replied, trying to pretend he had partly meant her. “After we spoke, I found somebody inside the Founding Stone. Kind of like a semblance. The guy who made the stone shaped some of himself into it. He sent me here.”

“I see,” Harmony said. “When your mind departed, I must have been completely frozen again. From my point of view, we were just speaking. You appeared immediately after we finished.”

“Everyone was frozen but me,” Cole said. “I know one thing. Owandell is furious right now.”

“And baffled,” Harmony said. “He’ll suppose you’re powerful indeed to have slipped through his grasp. And he won’t be entirely wrong. It really was quite a feat. Did he see your face?”

“He got a good look at me, but I had my hood up and my face wrapped.”

Harmony folded her arms. “That’s enough to be dangerous. Your shaping power is very distinctive to those who can perceive it. Owandell would not have missed it, and you’re right about his fury.”

“I need to get out of here,” Cole said.

“Don’t be too hasty. Owandell can’t touch you here in my tower. He’s already moving to watch all exits. You won’t escape him with speed. Tell me what you learned.”

“Owandell helps run the Brotherhood of Nazeem,” Cole said. “They’ve been around in secret for a long time. It seems like Nazeem is where shapecrafting comes from. At least the shapecrafting that Owandell knows. The guy in the Founding Stone called it lawless shaping.”

“An apt description,” Harmony said. “You mentioned they’re trying to free Nazeem.”

“Sounds like that’s their main goal,” Cole said. “He’s at a place called the Fallen Temple in Necronum. They act like once he’s free, nobody can stop them. And they expect it to happen soon. Nazeem ordered them to make their final preparations.”

“Did they give specifics?” Harmony asked. “Any dates?”

“No details,” Cole said. “Nazeem didn’t speak long before noticing me.”

“This is still valuable information,” Harmony said. “Anything else?”

“Dandalus, the guy in the Founding Stone, said shapecraft could destroy the world.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Harmony said. “Consider what happened with Carnag and Morgassa. That could be only the beginning. You have served me well, Cole. Owandell has guarded this information for a great while. I’m surprised to learn his plots involve more than shapecraft and political maneuvers. I had no inkling that he served some mysterious master. I don’t know how he kept this secret so perfectly. I’ve never heard of Nazeem or the Fallen Temple. I’ll investigate and see what I can learn.”

Cole stared out at the vast view, lit by stars and the silvery light of the rising moon. “Do you sense your daughters?”

Harmony walked to the railing and gripped it tightly. “Yes, but tonight I’m troubled.” Her eyes gazed out into the moon-glossed distance. “I fear for Destiny and Honor. They’re both in Necronum, close to each other. Something is wrong. Their panic started earlier this evening, and has only escalated since then.”

“They’re in danger?” Cole asked.

Harmony nodded. “Mortal peril. I’ve lingered here all night. I would try to help them, but who is left to send?”

“Honor is tough,” Cole said.



Eyes still far away, Harmony placed a hand over her heart. “Sometimes toughness isn’t enough. Or bravery.” She turned to Cole. “This isn’t a world for children. I’m not sure it’s a world for anyone.”

“I’ll help if I can,” Cole said.

Harmony smiled sadly. “You’re a child too. For now, you have hardships of your own to endure. Survive one mission at a time. If Nori or Tessa can use help, I’ll place markers in the sky. Mira and others know where to look. I have drawn you a map that marks the location of Abram Trench’s most secret lair. It’s where he’s holding Constance. Will you take it to Googol and Nova for me?”

“Of course,” Cole said.

“You’ll want the code phrase that lets Constance know I trust you,” Harmony said. “The words are different for each child. Tell her ‘Follow the path and don’t look back.’”

“Got it,” Cole said.

“Guard those words with your life. Nobody knows about them, so even if you’re captured, I doubt you’ll be asked to divulge them. If you are, give the phrase ‘Meet me by the waterfall.’ Should somebody use those words, it will signal to Constance that something is amiss.”

“Thanks for trusting me,” Cole said. “I won’t let you down.”

“By the way, I found where your friend Jenna was taken,” Harmony said.

“Really?” Cole replied. With all that had happened, he wondered if she might have forgotten to follow up.

“She went to Necronum,” Harmony said. “To the Temple of the Still Water.”

Cole could hardly contain his excitement. “Thank you! She’s a close friend. I’ve been searching for her since I came here.”

“Glad I could be of service,” Harmony replied. “I’ll send Sophie to fetch you an errand-boy uniform. It will be the best way to leave the castle. Others will help you make your way to the train station. All will be arranged. You’ll leave on the earliest train of the day.”

“Can I avoid using my ID?” Cole asked.

“Don’t you have it?” she asked.

“I have it,” Cole said, feeling one of the pockets inside his robe to make sure. “There are people looking for me.”

“Even I must show my ID to ride the train,” Harmony said. “Perhaps we

could figure out another way with more time to plan. But time is of the essence. The best we can do is make sure you board right before departure.”

“Okay,” Cole said. “That’ll have to work.”

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Reclining in a comfortable seat, Cole watched the sunrise through the train window. He sipped hot chocolate and nibbled on a sweet roll with raspberry filling. More tired than hungry, he was using the food to stay alert.

He had boarded the train in darkness, wearing jeans and a leather jacket. Everything had gone so smoothly that it made him feel extra vigilant.

Nobody had stopped him when he left the First Castle with a group of errand boys. A woman had met him at an inn and helped him get to the train station with a change of clothes. Nobody had looked twice as he boarded the train. Nobody in his nearly full car acted suspicious.

Was it possible he would get away clean? Owandell couldn’t cover every way out of Junction. The mysterious spy who escaped him could be headed to any kingdom, or could still be hiding in the castle, or elsewhere in Junction City.

But what about the Hunter? As soon as Cole presented his ID, the Enforcers must have started scrambling to intercept him. And Owandell was the head of the Enforcers. Would the Hunter figure out that the kid he was looking for was the spy who had escaped the gathering with Nazeem?

Queen Harmony had assured him she would contact the Unseen in Zeropolis so that somebody would be there to meet him when he arrived at the main terminal. But what about when he transferred at Outpost 19? He could only hope the Hunter wouldn’t have time to get people in place.

The sun rose higher, and the ride remained monotonous. The seat was so comfy, and there didn’t seem to be any threats present. He hadn’t slept much the night before. In spite of all the potential danger, Cole began to struggle to keep his eyes open. He decided that if he was going to sleep, it would be best to do it before the transfer.

He awoke as the train slowed to a stop at Outpost 19. Today Cole traveled with a small, empty knapsack, just so it would look like he had some luggage. The map to Abram Trench’s top secret hideout was safely tucked in his jacket pocket.

Cole exited and started following the crowd to the monorail. Then he stopped in his tracks.

Two large robots stood in front of the monorail, surveying the approaching passengers. Tall, sleek, and black, they looked just like the drone that the Hunter had used to try to catch him in Zeropolis. Several people boarding the monorail glanced uncomfortably at the gangly robots.

Trying to stay casual, Cole turned away from the monorail, only to find a third drone guarding the station's exit, positioned between the stairs and the senders. At the moment, people from the train swarmed near Cole, many of them taller than him. None of the drones appeared to have noticed him yet.

Cole crouched down and pretended to tie his shoe. The crowd would help hide him while passengers were transferring, but once that was finished, he'd have no cover.

Should he try to slip out of the station? What would he do alone in an isolated outpost? How would he get to Zeropolis? The Hunter would just send people to track him down. He needed to get on the monorail. What were his chances of slipping by the robots? Could he use somebody as a human shield?

Cole knew he needed to act. If he delayed, he would be taken. He couldn't let that happen! Dalton and his friends needed him. Queen Harmony was counting on him to deliver Constance's location. Mira had to find her sister. He hadn't survived spying on Owandell to get nabbed by a couple of robots.

A hefty man in a striped suit passed near Cole on his way to the monorail. Cole rose and followed him, staying close enough that he had no view of the drones. The man made his way toward one of the doors closest to the front. That was good! It put both drones on the same side.

As the monorail drew near, Cole carefully shifted from behind the man to his side, keeping the robots out of sight. As the man reached the steps up to the door, Cole slipped ahead of him, head turned partly away from the drones, and handed his ticket to the conductor.

A metal hand clamped down on his shoulder from behind.

"A moment of your time," the robot requested in a male voice that sounded nothing like the Hunter.

"The monorail departs in eight minutes," the conductor warned.

Cole tried to twist away from the metal grip, but the fingers tightened,

making his struggles useless. “Okay,” Cole said, backing away from the monorail.

Never releasing him, the drone marched Cole across the floor of the station. Cole tried to reach for his power. Even with the shapecrafted barriers in place, he knew it was still possible to access his ability. The Founding Stone had taught him that much.

But no matter how hard he pushed, Cole could feel no glimmer of his power. He attempted to make his vision detach and go roaming. He tried to teleport. His efforts amounted to nothing more than wishful thinking.

The drone took him through a nondescript door. They went down a hall to a room where a woman waited—a pretty blonde in a white shirt with a blue leather vest and matching pants. In the corner a metal coffin sat on a wheeled cart.

The drone forced Cole into the room. The tall robot had to crouch a little to fit through the doorway.

“You led us on a merry chase,” the woman said. “I didn’t think you’d make the mistake of coming back this way, but the Hunter was right. Maybe one day I’ll learn not to doubt him.”

The drone was still gripping Cole. There was no way to run. All he had left were words. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you do,” the woman said, producing a syringe. “It’s over, kid. Try to relax.”

While the drone held Cole steady, she swiftly poked the needle into his arm and pressed the plunger. Cole squirmed and bucked, but it did no good.

Whatever she had injected into him acted quickly. His head became light, and the woman began to blur. Within a moment Cole limply swayed as the floor seemed to tilt. The drone held him up.

“Don’t do this,” Cole said, the words mushy. “Please, let me go.”

“Don’t fight it,” the woman said. “Relax. You have a train to catch.”

The woman lifted the hinged lid of the coffin, and the drone placed Cole inside. It was padded. Cole fought to keep his eyes open but lost consciousness before the lid closed.

## CHAPTER

# 30

## THE HUNTER

Consciousness returned by degrees. All Cole knew at first was that he still felt too tired to open his eyes. The hard surface beneath him failed to ignite his curiosity. Where exactly was he? Did it matter? He had awakened in many different places over the past couple of months. At least it was quiet. On his back with his eyes closed, he could be anywhere.

When he moved to wipe his eyes, Cole found that his arm was restrained. His eyes snapped open, the drowsy calm dispelled. He discovered that his arms and legs were cuffed to a metal table inside a bare, white room. A panicked burst of struggling proved that the restraints were solid. A counter with a sink and several drawers looked to be the only furnishings besides his metal slab.

Getting captured came back to him in a rush. How had he forgotten? The injection must have left him groggy.

How long had he been out? His mouth was really dry and had a coppery taste. A long time could have passed. Where was he? It looked like a room in a hospital. Maybe a mental hospital? Or some kind of prison?

“Rise and shine!” greeted the youthful voice of the Hunter from a speaker in the ceiling. “I guess you can’t rise yet, but I’m glad you’re awake. You had a nice trip?”

“Where am I?” Cole asked, unsure if the Hunter could hear him.

“You’re at my favorite retreat in Zeropolis,” the Hunter said. “I’m here too. I’ll come see you in a minute.”

“Could you bring some water?”

“You bet. Sit tight.”

Cole waited. It wasn't long before the door opened and a person entered dressed all in dark leather. A helmet hid the face. The person set a glass of water on the counter, then closed the door and locked it.

Pulling off his helmet, the person revealed himself to be a boy about Cole's age. The kid stared at Cole for a long moment, his face lighting up with joy and relief. His huge smile looked involuntary. Tears shimmered in his eyes.

“I can't believe it's really you,” he said.

The reaction left Cole confused. “Man, you really wanted to catch me.”

The Hunter laughed, still looking delighted. “Yeah, I guess I did. You didn't make it easy.”

“You're the Hunter?” Cole asked.

“You knew I was young,” he said. “Almost as young as you. I'm a little older than I look. My shaping powers make me age slowly. Take a good look at me. Do I look familiar?”

Cole was at a loss. The kid had brown hair and a friendly face. “Not really.”

The Hunter came closer. “Come on. Look hard. Think. Nobody is listening anymore. Who am I, Cole?”

“Have we met before?” Cole asked, thoroughly perplexed. Was this some kind of weird form of torture?

The Hunter looked a little disappointed. “You've known me most of your life.”

“Most of my life was back on Earth.”

The Hunter watched him. “You're getting warmer.”

“I knew you on Earth?”

“In Idaho and Arizona,” the Hunter said.

Cole looked him up and down, trying to place him. “Has it been a while? Were you a lot younger or something?”

The Hunter shook his head. “Part of the time. You've known me since you were born. The last time you saw me, I looked pretty much like this. Come on, think.”

“Are you just messing with me?”

“No. We both love soccer. Your parents are Bryant and Liz Randolph.”

“How do you know that?”

“They're my parents too, dummy. I'm your brother. Hunter Randolph.”

Cole was speechless. This was ludicrous. What kind of game was the Hunter playing? The kid was not familiar at all. "Yeah, whatever."

"Don't, Cole. I'm serious. Look at me. Can't you see the family resemblance?"

Cole supposed he and the kid shared some physical similarities. But they were hardly twins. "You look my age."

"I'm about two years older than you. In more than two years, I've only aged about six months. Chelsea is a year older than me."

Cole shook his head. "You are such a liar. You searched me on the Internet. Nice try. No way am I believing you."

"Think, Cole," the Hunter said. "Nobody back home remembers you. I was taken before you, so you don't remember me. I hoped that maybe since we were both here now, there might be a little spark of memory."

Cole honestly had no shred of memory of this kid. It had to be a lie. Surely he would remember his own brother. "Why would my brother work for the High King?" he challenged.

"The same reason the CIA works for the president," the Hunter said. "The High King is in charge. He's been good to me. You've gotten involved with some bad people, Cole. You have no idea."

Cole shook his head. This was so bogus. "You must think I'm dumb as a rock."

"Use your head," the Hunter said. "If you're not my brother, you're just some runaway slave. Why would I go to all this effort to bring you in without anybody knowing?"

"To get me to betray my friends."

"I wouldn't mind that," the Hunter mused. "But there are easier ways to get to your friends. The patrolmen could force you to give them up. Or the legionnaires. They have cruel methods that work. I'm trying to give you a second chance. You got mixed up with the wrong side. I get it. I know what it's like to be new here. It's confusing. You got brainwashed. When I saw your picture in Carthage, I realized who you were. I got permission from the High King to let you join us. You're my brother. I'm trying to save you."

Cole laughed. "Is that why I'm locked up?"

"You're locked up until I decide you won't do anything stupid. Come on, Cole. I'm not familiar at all?"

"Not a bit," Cole said sincerely.

The Hunter reached into his pocket and took out a wallet. He removed a little photo and held it up to Cole. It was the family picture that hung in their living room. Cole knew it well. A few years old, the picture showed him, Chelsea, and their parents. And some other kid.

Cole blinked, then squinted.

“Wait a minute,” he said.

“That’s right,” the Hunter encouraged. “Do you see?”

The other kid in the photo was the Hunter, looking not much younger than he did right now.

“No way,” Cole said. “You faked this.”

“I brought the picture here with me. Look at it.”

Cole closed his eyes.

“I said look,” the Hunter urged.

“Give me a second,” Cole said. He was trying to envision the picture in the living room. There was no extra kid in it, was there? He had a faint recollection of noticing another kid in the shot, and briefly wondering who it could be. Was that even a real memory?

Cole opened his eyes. The Hunter was unmistakable, right in the middle of the picture. He was wearing the right clothes and had the right hair style. In the picture, he and Cole definitely looked like brothers.

“It looks real,” Cole said.

“Because it is,” the Hunter said. “I still look like myself. I haven’t aged much, and I haven’t dyed my hair.”

“I was trying to avoid detection,” Cole said.

“I saw the e-mails you sent to the family account,” the Hunter said. “Did you see mine?”

“No,” Cole said.

“I’ve been sending them for years,” the Hunter said. “It was funny to see you sending the same kind of messages while not opening mine.”

“Can I see?” Cole asked.

“Sure, I have a thruport here,” the Hunter said. “There are plenty of other pictures of me in the family e-mail account and on social media. Maybe now you’ll recognize me in them.”

Cole didn’t want to believe any of this. But what if the Hunter wasn’t lying? What if it was true? “You lived in our house?” Cole asked.

“Right across the hall from your room,” the Hunter said.



“That’s the guest room,” Cole replied.

The Hunter stared at him meaningfully. “Maybe now. What about all my soccer stuff? My trophies? My posters?”

Cole scrunched his brow. What exactly was in the guest room? Were there trophies? He couldn’t form a clear picture in his mind. “I don’t know. I don’t remember any of that.”

The Hunter laughed bitterly. “Now we have two guest rooms. And even more unnoticed trophies.”

“I don’t remember you,” Cole said honestly. “This seems impossible.”

“The Outskirts is a weird place,” the Hunter said. “I hate that you can’t remember. Think. Practicing soccer in the backyard. Christmas mornings. You have to trust that I remember you! You’re my little brother! We’ll become friends again. We did it once.”

Cole stared at the Hunter. Could this be true? He had always thought it would be cool to have a brother. Could those yearnings have replaced his actual memories?

“I don’t know what to say,” Cole said.

“I knew this might be hard for you,” the Hunter said. “I knew you might not remember. I’ll give you lots of proof. This isn’t a trick. I know all sorts of things you can’t find on the Internet. Remember when that peacock chased Chelsea at the Phoenix Zoo? Remember when Mom backed the car into the garage door? Remember that time we camped in the backyard and you wet your sleeping bag?”

“That was just with Dad.”

The Hunter shook his head. “It was the three of us. I went and got you fresh underwear and sweatpants.”

“Who is my best friend in Mesa?”

“Is it still Dalton?”

“Who was the old guy in Boise that probably killed our cat?”

“Mr. Barrum.”

Cole tried to think of more things only a family member would know. “What does Mom keep in the bathroom to read?”

“Those condensed books. *Reader’s Digest*. And Dad sometimes brings in *Sports Illustrated*.”

Cole stared at the kid who was probably his brother. “What is Chelsea allergic to?”

The Hunter scowled in thought. "I don't remember."

Cole rolled his eyes. "It's a food. You should know this."

"Right! Frozen berries. They give her weird little sores on her tongue."

"What animal does Mom hate?"

"Geckos."

Cole felt like he might cry. How could the Hunter know so many obscure details? Cole considered how much he hoped his family would remember him. His brother had been going through this for years now. "How are you the Hunter?"

"People call me the Hunter. Really I'm just Hunter. Hunter Randolph. Your brother."

"But you're on the wrong side," Cole whispered.

Hunter shook his head. "You're just brainwashed. It'll be okay. I'll help you."

"No way, Hunter. You might really be my brother. If it's true, I'm so sorry I don't remember you. But if you think you're on the right side, you don't know the whole story."

Hunter sighed. "I'm sure they told you all sorts of things. Every criminal has excuses. Some probably sound pretty good. The Unseen are terrorists. They're trying to destroy the Outskirts. It may take some time, but I'll help you see what's really going on."

Cole tried to stay calm. He had to believe Hunter didn't know some key facts if he was happy fighting for the High King. What information was most likely to sway him? "Do you know who you've been chasing?"

"A slave girl named Mira," Hunter said. "She ran away with secrets vital to the High King. He wants her alive."

"Do you know who Mira really is?" Cole asked.

"I just told you."

"Do you know about Stafford's five daughters?"

"Everybody does. They died in an accident a long time ago."

Cole shook his head. "Their father faked their deaths. He stole their shaping powers with shapecraft, and wanted to keep them imprisoned, but they got away. Losing their powers made them completely stop aging. They lived in exile for decades. Mira is Miracle Pemberton. For some reason, the shapecraft that took their powers started to unravel, and Stafford started to lose

his stolen abilities. He wants his daughters back so he can take their powers again.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Hunter said. “I’m relieved you have good reasons for taking the wrong side. If I believed that were true, I wouldn’t want to serve the High King either. But it’s all lies, Cole. That’s what the rebels do.”

“Those aren’t lies,” Cole said. “I’ve been with Mira for months. Shapecrafters used her powers to make Carnag. She got her abilities back when we defeated the monster. Same with Honor in Elloweer.”

“I don’t know what you think you saw,” Hunter said, sounding a little agitated. “But they’re tricking you.”

“If you’re my brother, listen to me,” Cole said. “Do you know about shapecraft?”

“Yeah,” Hunter said. “I don’t use it, but I know a little about it.”

“You work for Owandell, right?”

“Technically, since he’s the head of the Enforcers. But I’m one of the High King’s slaves. I lead my own team of Enforcers and report directly to the High Shaper.”

“How can you work for a guy who made you a slave?” Cole asked.

“It’s how it works here,” Hunter said. “They have different laws than in our world. Slaves are legal, but they get treated well. It’s not like I’m in chains breaking rocks with a sledgehammer. I have lots of responsibilities, and I do just about whatever I want. It’s more like I just work for the High King.”

“As his slave.”

“Catching criminals. Like you.”

“Do you know about Nazeem?” Cole asked.

“Who?”

“Owandell’s real master. He’s imprisoned in the Fallen Temple in Necronum.”

Hunter rubbed his temples as if getting a headache. “The lies of the Unseen get weirder and weirder.”

“I didn’t hear this from the Unseen,” Cole said. “I was in disguise at a gathering led by Owandell last night. We were under his tower in the room with the Founding Stone. Nazeem appeared. He’s where shapecraft comes from. He is seriously evil. When he gets free, Owandell and his shapecrafters are going to try to take over the Outskirts.”

Hunter looked at Cole skeptically. “You saw this?”

“I almost got caught,” Cole said. “I used my shaping power to escape.”

“What can you do?”

“My power is mostly blocked right now. It happened when we fought Morgassa. She used shapecraft on me before she died. But my power can energize things. I made renderings from Sambria work in Elloweer. My Jumping Sword, for example. Somehow the Founding Stone helped temporarily unblock my power. I energized the stone and it helped me escape.”

“This was last night?” Hunter asked.

“I went to the train station afterward.”

Hunter frowned. “I know that shapecrafters are made, not born. Owandell invited me to become one. But I don’t trust the shapecrafters I’ve met, and I don’t like Owandell. The High King is wary of him too. We thought he invented shapecraft. Why haven’t I heard of Nazeem?”

“Nobody knows,” Cole said. “If you check, you’ll find Owandell is desperately looking for me. I learned his big secret.”

“He knows who you are?” Hunter asked.

“I was in disguise,” Cole said. “But some of my friends are worried he may have seen my shaping power and be able to use that to recognize me.”

“Your friends are probably right. How did you get into that meeting?”

“I had help inside the castle,” Cole said. “Not the High King. I shouldn’t say who.”

“You’re sure about Nazeem?”

“Hunter, I’m positive. I was there. If you’re my brother, act like it and believe me a little! At least check it out. Nazeem taught Owandell how to use shapecraft. And Owandell used shapecraft to help Stafford steal his own daughters’ powers and fake their deaths.”

Hunter folded his arms and smiled grimly. “There’s no way you’re right about the daughters.”

“How do you not know this?” Cole asked. “I thought you were high up in the Enforcers?”

“I am.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be good at digging up secrets?”

“My specialty is tracking people down.”

“Well, go find this out. The High King is a bad man. He made the laws that got both of us taken as slaves, along with a bunch of other kids from our

neighborhood. He betrayed his own daughters in a big way. And obviously he lies to the slaves who work for him.”

Hunter put his hands on his hips. “Listen, Cole. You can’t imagine how excited I am to see you. I want to prove I’m your brother. Most of what you told me has to be Unseen propaganda, but I’ll look into it. In return, knowing what you now know, I want you to use a thrupt, get on the Internet, and confirm that I’m your brother.”

“That might be hard while I’m bound to a table,” Cole said.

“If you promise to behave, I’ll free you.”

“Promise you’ll look into Owandell and the High King?”

“To really do this, I might have to go to Junction. But yeah, I’ll check it out.”

“Then I’ll behave. But hurry. There’s stuff I need to do.”

“What if I bring proof that these are lies?”

Cole thought about that. “It would have to be really solid proof. I’ve seen a lot of firsthand evidence that this is true.”

“Maybe you only think you’ve seen proof. I’ve been here a lot longer than you, Cole. You might be deceived and confused.”

Cole shrugged. “If you’re right, I’ll come to your side. But if I’m right, you better come to mine.”

“Fair enough. Deal.”

“Does this mean you’ll finally give me that water?”

Hunter glanced at the glass on the counter. “I’ll do even better than that—I’ll free your hands so you can drink it.”

## CHAPTER

# 31

## EVIDENCE

**B**efore he was captured, if Cole had been asked what life would look like as the Hunter's prisoner, he would have described squalid cells, limited food, and plenty of torture. Instead he had thruport access, a roomy shower, a hot tub, gourmet meals, a soft bed, and magnetic games to play.

He was still a prisoner. Though free to move about a space that included five comfortable rooms, all other doors were locked to him. One of the tall robotic drones remained nearby at every moment.

After a few hours doing some initial research, Hunter had decided that he needed to travel to Junction in order to disprove Cole's claims. Hunter had promised to return soon.

That was three days ago.

After seeing scores of photos and reading hundreds of e-mails, Cole had lost interest in scouring the Internet for more evidence that Hunter was part of his family. If the relationship was a lie, Hunter had been incredibly thorough, tampering with every e-mail address, website, and social media account that Cole could find. Every photo was either genuine or expertly doctored. Every e-mail either offered a glimpse of a lost brother, or proved how thoroughly a liar could fabricate a false reality.

If he kept looking, Cole knew he might uncover a few more shreds of evidence but didn't expect that any new discovery would change his dilemma. If fake, the forgeries were amazing. Otherwise, Hunter really was his brother.

In his gut, Cole felt convinced it was true.

What did Hunter have to gain from this deception? Why single out Cole? If they wanted his power, they could have a shapecrafter take it. If they wanted his information, they could pressure him. What reason would Hunter have to be this kind to him if they weren't really related?

Hunter did bear a family resemblance to the other Randolphs. He knew too many things a stranger couldn't possibly know. He talked and behaved in a way that felt authentic. And additional evidence was all over the Internet, including so many futile e-mails that went unanswered after he disappeared.

Given this much proof, Cole wondered how he could ever hope the rest of his family would accept him, if he couldn't accept Hunter. The two of them were in the exact same predicament, except Hunter had suffered longer and had one extra person who had forgotten him.

But what if he was wrong?

What if this notoriously crafty enemy did have reasons to want the loyalty from Cole that he would show to a brother?

Cole had solid reasons to believe that Hunter was telling the truth, but if he was wrong, he would be so epically, tragically wrong! The thought made shame congeal inside of him. He would be such a fool! So pathetically gullible!

And what if Hunter really was his brother, but remained loyal to the High King? What if he came back from his trip to Zeropolis full of reasons that Cole should side against Mira and the Unseen?

Was there any chance the High King was right? That the Unseen really were criminals? That slavery was okay? That partnering with Owandell had been a good call? That stripping his daughters' powers and faking their deaths was fine? No. What if the daughters were really dead, and Mira and her sisters were planted by the Unseen? No. How could the Unseen have planted Carnag, or Morgassa, or the Rogue Knight? The thought was ludicrous.

If Hunter was his brother, Cole had to win him over to the right side. Or he had to get away. If necessary, he could pretend to switch sides, until he earned enough freedom to escape.

But until Hunter returned, his options were limited. The drone robot kept him company, leaving him no opportunity to break out. He knew Mira, Dalton, and all the others would be worried. They needed the information he had about Constance. They needed to know about Owandell and Nazeem. But what could he do? He was stuck.

So Cole played elaborate versions of magnetic pinball and waited for his brother.

No, waited for the Enforcer who was probably his brother.

Possibly.

Hunter returned as Cole was piling points on top of a new high score. With some reluctance, Cole let the ball roll past the magnetic boosters, ending the game. Steeling himself, he turned to face his captor.

Hunter wore dark leather and held a helmet under his arm. His face was serious and hard to read.

“How was your trip?” Cole asked.

“I’m not sure exactly how to answer that,” Hunter said. “How was the Internet?”

“Either you faked it perfectly, or you’re my brother.”

Hunter looked hurt. “You’re still not sure? You can ask me anything.”

“What if you can read my mind?”

“Nobody can do that,” Hunter said dismissively.

“I know somebody who can,” Cole said, thinking of Trillian. “And some others who maybe can. At least our minds spoke to each other.”

Hunter glanced over at the drone robot. “Charlie, go passive.”

“Confirmation?” the drone asked.

“Glazed doughnuts with sprinkles.”

The drone went still and silent.

“Nice code word,” Cole said.

“Hard words to guess,” Hunter replied. “Easy to remember. But just saying it gives me cravings.”

“It’s a robot but you can also control it?” Cole asked.

“It has different modes,” Hunter replied. “It’s the same model I was controlling when I almost caught you that time. Look, if you still have doubts about me, you’re about to lose them.” He paused, his expression grave. “I guess you could say that my mission in Junction was successful. I went there to learn if you were right about the High King and his daughters. And I found out the truth.”

Cole watched him expectantly. His face was so tricky to read. It suddenly struck Cole how much his eyes really did look like Cole’s father’s. *Their father’s?*

“You got proof? You know that I’m right?”



Hunter sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, you are.”

“I am?” Cole replied in surprise. “I mean, you know I am?”

“I didn’t expect it to be true,” Hunter said. “I still can’t even believe it. The High King withheld all of it from me. I thought he trusted me more than that. I’ve done a lot for him. He personally helped me develop my shaping skills.”

“Really?”

“It made sense,” Hunter said. “We were both strong in the abilities of all five kingdoms. But he’s weak now. I saw him on this visit. In private, kind of joking around, I asked him to do some of our old drills. He did some spatial stuff from Creon, but weakly, and got angry when I tried to get him to do Sambrian shaping or Ellowine enchanting.”

“Was that your proof?”

“Oh, no,” Hunter said. “I’m more thorough than that. I checked other sources. In the end I went to Owandell.”

“Really?”

“He knows I’ve always been loyal to the High King. Acting like a traitor would have raised suspicions. I played it like I’d noticed the High Shaper was becoming weak, and I wanted to keep my options open. I asked Owandell how the hunt for Stafford’s daughters was going, as if I had full knowledge about them. He became smug, and asked if I had heard about recent developments in Necronum. I guess Honor and Destiny are in trouble. He seemed to know a lot about what is going on, but wouldn’t say more.”

“Did you mention Nazeem?” Cole asked.

“Not directly,” Hunter said. “I told him I heard that a spy had recently escaped him. It really set him on edge. I could tell he hated that I knew anything about it. I told him I was good at tracking people down, but he took it as a threat. He didn’t want my help.”

“Wasn’t that dangerous?” Cole asked.

“Absolutely. Nobody wants Owandell as an enemy. But it was the surest way to find out what I needed to know. Cole, you have to believe me that the High King kept these crimes from me. I’ve never liked Owandell. The High King hasn’t trusted him since I’ve been here. To learn they worked together to steal the princesses’ powers, and to find out I was helping track down one of his daughters without knowing it . . . let’s just say I’ve rethought a lot of things. It makes me feel sick thinking of everything I did.”

“You’re switching sides?” Cole asked.

Hunter gave a dark chuckle. “This isn’t easy, Cole. I’m in deep. So many people are going to be so mad. The High Shaper most of all.”

“But . . .,” Cole prompted.

Hunter smiled. “But I’m not going to fight my little brother. Especially when he’s right.”

Cole couldn’t help laughing. He couldn’t help smiling. He couldn’t resist the tears. Relief washed over him. This surpassed his highest hopes. Unless . . .

“You’re not just saying this to trick me,” Cole checked, his inner celebration pausing.

Hunter’s smile froze. “What?”

“To get info out of me,” Cole said. “You know, pretend we’re on the same side so I tell you everything.”

Hunter stared at him. “That would be a smart tactic.”

“Yeah,” Cole said, wiping tears from his cheeks. “Whether or not you’re really my brother. If you’re still loyal to Stafford, it’s what you would do.”

Hunter nodded. “I probably would. But I’m not. Do the math. The stuff on the Internet. Everything I know. How I’m treating you. If nothing else, can’t you see how awful I feel for being such an idiot and falling for all those lies?”

A part of Cole kind of agreed with Hunter’s harsh words about himself—it was hard not to judge Hunter and Blake for having joined up with the wrong sides here in the Outskirts. Hadn’t they noticed some signs they were working for bad people? But Cole also knew he couldn’t be completely positive what he would have done if he hadn’t met Mira and Jace when he did.

“So what now?” he asked.

“We make plans. I’m on your side, Cole. I wouldn’t have sided with the resistance before I learned all this, but even then I was on your side. You’re my brother. I care more about you than everyone in the Outskirts combined. If I could, I’d take you home. We’d get out of here right now, together. But we can’t. It doesn’t work.”

“How do I trust you?”

“You just do. I’m not playing you. I already know about the map in your pocket.”

“Yeah?”

“I searched you while you were out. Nobody else knows about it. They were under orders that only I was allowed to search you. I put the map back. My guess is you went to Junction to get it. Met up with some contact. And it must have something to do with Constance.”

“What?” Cole asked, trying to sound confused, still on his guard. The queen had made no written explanation of what the marked location meant.

“I’ve been following you since Sambria,” Hunter reminded him. “It’s what you’ve been doing all along. First Mira, then Honor. What I don’t get is how you ended up spying on Owandell. Nobody knew about that meeting.”

“The Unseen have good sources,” Cole said.

“I guess,” Hunter said. “Anyhow, listen. What if I sneak you out of here? What if we go to a hideout only I know about? And then what if we find Constance together?”

“But what if you backstab me and keep her?” Cole asked. “What if that’s all this is about?”

“Knock it off. It’ll be perfect. I’ll make my team think I’m playing you. Letting you help me infiltrate the Unseen. I do stuff like this sometimes. We’ll take off on our own. And in the end, we’ll double-cross them.”

“Or you’ll double-cross me,” Cole said.

“You’re making this harder than it needs to be,” Hunter said.

“People are counting on me. People I care about. I can’t blow this.”

“I’m not going to backstab my brother.”

“Unless you’re not my brother. Or unless you still secretly think I’m on the wrong side.”

Hunter scowled. “I’ve given you tons of proof, Cole. What more do you want?”

“Let me go,” Cole said. “Get me back to my friends. We’ll find Constance. You can help us as an insider until you’re ready to come over.”

“That’s an option, I guess,” Hunter mused. “But how do I explain you getting away without looking like a traitor? If I let you go, I’ll need to get out too. And no matter what you tell the Unseen, they aren’t going to work with me if I come to them empty-handed. What’s the story with Constance? She’s not just hiding, right? She’s in trouble.”

“She was captured,” Cole said, unsure if it was too much information to share.

“She’s being held by Abram Trench?” Hunter asked.

“What makes you say that?”

“The facility on the map is over a hundred feet below the ground. Trench owns the waste-disposal center above it. After examining your map, I did some research.”

“Good for you,” Cole said.

“You’re missing the point. I already figured out where Constance is. If she’s all I want, why don’t I go get her without you? I could put together a team right now and do it.”

Cole thought about it. “That’s a really good point.” He could feel himself wavering. This probably really was his brother. Shouldn’t they just go get Constance together?

“Nobody knows about the secret base where Abram has her,” Hunter said. “The High King keeps Abram Trench under close watch. We track all his little secrets. I have access to all our info on him, and this is new.”

“Wouldn’t we want help from the Unseen?” Cole asked.

“I don’t know if the Unseen could manage this one. Not after they’ve been so torn up by City Patrol. This is the kind of operation for a couple of guys—in and out. Stealthy. We won’t get her with brute force. Abram has too many resources. Also, if I help deliver Constance to them, the Unseen will have a good reason to start trusting me. I already checked out Trench’s base.”

“You did? How?”

“Using a drone and some specialized tools. There aren’t any plans for it in any records I could find. I had to investigate firsthand. There’s almost no way in. But we could swing it if we each controlled a drone.”

“You sound like a pro. How’d you get so good at this stuff?”

Hunter blushed a little. “I didn’t know squat at first. Do you get how it works here? What people really value? It’s all about shaping. A reliable shaper will end up with good treatment, free or not. A great shaper gets treated almost like royalty. I’m pretty good at all five types. So they put me on the fast track. As I proved I could shape well in combat situations, my responsibilities grew. And I ended up learning all sorts of things.”

Cole supposed he had also learned a lot since coming to the Outskirts, and it had only been a couple of months. “We can just walk out of here?”

“If you’ll trust me, yeah, we take off, my people think I’m undercover, and we can do whatever we want until they figure out I went over to the rebellion.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Wait a minute. Never mind. You just talked me out of it.”

“Come on,” Cole said. “I’m serious.”

Hunter laid a hand on his shoulder. “Cole, you’re my brother. I’ve known you since you were born. I can’t keep working for the High King after learning about his daughters. I have to start making amends for the harm I’ve caused. I think a lot of people will feel the same way. With the princesses, the rebellion has a real chance. Plus, our biggest problem might actually be Owandell and this Nazeem guy. I don’t think the High King can stop him. I’m with you a hundred percent. Let’s do this.”

“All right,” Cole said. “I’m in.”

Hunter smiled. “Thanks for trusting me.”

“Is it hard to control a drone?”

“You’ll know before long.”

## CHAPTER

# 32

## DRONES

Night had fallen by the time Hunter led Cole out to the street and summoned a levcar with a blank ID card. They both wore regular clothes.

“Nice card,” Cole said after getting into the car.

Hunter held up the ID, a blue rectangle with nothing printed on it. “No photo, so I can’t use it at checkpoints. The great thing is it randomly mimics over ten million existing ID cards. According to all records, we’re not riding in this levcar. It’s some other Zeropolitan citizen.”

“Cool,” Cole said.

“It’s only the beginning,” Hunter promised. “Just wait. In Zeropolis, I work with a technomancer named Clayton Barnes. Only Googol and Abram Trench can rival his talent. He makes certain types of tech better than anybody. He developed the drones I use, and he created this card.”

“Where exactly are we going?” Cole asked.

“I have a few hideouts in Zeropolis that only I know about. We’re going to my favorite. We’ll control the drones from there.”

“We’re going after Constance tonight?”

“I work with smart, suspicious people,” Hunter said. “No matter what precautions we take, we’ll only have a few days at best before they realize that I’ve gone over to the other side. We need to do everything we can before then. I left two drones in position, along with some other gizmos Clay provided to get us inside. We just have to fire them up and find your princess.”

“What about after we find Constance?” Cole asked.

“All figured out, little brother,” Hunter said with a cocky smile.

“I’m not that much littler than you.”

Hunter scowled. “I know, it’s weird. You’ve aged a couple of years since I’ve seen you, and I’ve stayed about the same. You’re catching up.”

“You were saying?”

Hunter smiled again. “We use the drones to take her to a safe house. Then I contact the Unseen.”

“How?”

“Remember that communicator they toasted when I almost captured you?”

Cole nodded.

“I was able to crack the harmonics on that crystal. I kept the frequency to myself, so my own people shouldn’t be listening in. Even if the Unseen aren’t actively using that frequency anymore, I bet they’re still monitoring it. Once we get in touch, we’ll set up a time and place to deliver Constance.”

“They’re probably in Old Zeropolis,” Cole said. “Will we use the tunnels?”

“That’s one option,” Hunter replied. “Or we could fly.”

“Excuse me?”

“Abram Trench doesn’t allow air travel in Zeropolis. But the technology has existed here for a long time. I answer to the High Shaper, not the Grand Shaper, so I have a magnetic glider.”

“No way.”

“Yep. It’s another of Clay’s creations. No wheels. The glider hovers like the warboard you used the day I almost caught you. Good work that day, by the way. You kept your cool and did a great job using your tech to escape. It’s part of why I want you to help me extract Constance.”

“Thanks,” Cole said. “So the glider flies really low?”

“No,” Hunter said with a chuckle. “That would be the worst. The hovering just works like the landing gear. Once you’re up, the glider flies like normal and propels itself, which maybe makes it not a true glider. But it’s small and light. Seats four. Thanks to the energy crystals, it basically has infinite fuel. I only fly it at night. It would stand out too much in the daylight.”

“You’re a pilot?”

“I can pilot the glider. A lot of the systems are automatic. I basically just steer and control the speed. It won’t let me crash. I can’t land it where there isn’t enough metal for the hover system to work, and it automatically corrects if I’m in danger of a collision or going into a spin. It’s awesome. I’ll miss working with Clayton.”

Cole considered what that meant. “You’re giving up a lot to join the resistance.”

Hunter shook his head. “Who wouldn’t give up working for the bad guys? Sure, I had lots of cool stuff. But I had no idea I was being used to hurt good people. Accepting that is hard. Giving up the stuff is easy. Think about how much you miss our family. What’s a bunch of stuff compared to that? Wouldn’t you trade anything to be back with them? I found my brother! That’s worth more than any of those gadgets.”

“I’m impressed.”

“What did you expect? I thought I was helping the good guys catch bad guys. Or at least the pretty good guys catch worse guys. I really thought you had been tricked by the Unseen. I was trying to help you. Instead, you helped me learn what’s really going on.”

“They’re going to be mad,” Cole said.

“That’s a major understatement,” Hunter replied. “Being an Enforcer isn’t a part-time job. You join for life, and you don’t betray them. They’ll come after me hard. Both Owandell and the High King will want my hide.”

“I’m sorry,” Cole said.

“It isn’t all bad,” Hunter said. “Things are changing. Everybody knows that much. The High King is weakening, Owandell is gaining followers, and crazy stuff is going on across the kingdoms. I’m pretty well known, so when I disappear, it’ll send another signal that something’s wrong. It will be good for the resistance when people hear I’m on their side. When the Unseen decide to tell everyone about the princesses, I can help the story seem more believable. And I might help convince some of the people I worked with to switch sides as well.”

For a time Cole stared out the window at the city lights. He contemplated all Hunter was leaving behind. Starting out as a slave, he had built a new life for himself here. And now he was throwing it away to do what he thought was right.

“I wish I could remember you,” Cole said.



“Me too,” Hunter replied. “It’s too bad.”

“I wish I could give you the welcome you deserve,” Cole said. “You must be a great guy. I’m glad you’re my brother.”

Hunter bowed his head, crouched forward, and started to shake. It took Cole a moment to recognize that his brother was sobbing. He reached across and patted his shoulders.

Wiping tears away, Hunter looked up. “I wish you could remember me too. But it’s enough that you believe me. I’ve been so lonely here. Finding you feels like a miracle. We weren’t just brothers, Cole. We were good friends, too. We messed around together all the time. We’ll be friends again. You’ll see.”

As they continued from street to street, their levcar swerving among the others, Cole fought to recall his brother. He could remember the events surrounding some of the pictures he had seen online with Hunter in them—a trip to California, a soccer game, Chelsea’s birthday. In contradiction to the photos, Hunter made no appearance in the memories.

After a long effort, Cole stopped trying. It was frustrating. If he could just remember something, it would mean he could hope that the rest of his family might one day remember him. It would also just be comforting. Knowing he had a brother was amazing, but actually remembering would make it mean more.

Eventually the levcar let them out at the base of a soaring skyscraper. Hunter led Cole into the lobby and used a small crystal sphere to open a nondescript door off to one side. Beyond the doorway, Hunter used the sphere to open the doors of a sender.

“It’s a private elevator,” Hunter explained.

“Don’t you mean sender?”

“You’re such a local,” Hunter said, rolling his eyes. “There are a few other private senders in this hall, but I’m the only person with access to this one.” They entered and the doors closed. “Want to push the button?”

Only two floors were represented—100 and G. Cole pressed 100. “Is it the penthouse?”

“The building advertises one hundred twenty floors,” Hunter said. “The penthouse was too visible. The building actually goes up to one hundred twenty-three—the real ninety-nine, one hundred, and one hundred one aren’t labeled and get skipped by all the other senders. The emergency

stairway is kept closed, and has blank metal doors on my floors. My rooms here are nice and private.”

The sender doors opened to reveal a lab. The worktables were a little messy, with mechanical gear and a variety of crystals on most of them. Hunter walked through the lab without a second glance and guided Cole into an adjoining room where three harnesses hung from the ceiling.

“Is this where we control the drones?” Cole asked.

“You guessed it,” Hunter said. “Come here.”

Hunter first adjusted the height of one of the harnesses, and then helped Cole step into it. Standing in the harness left Cole’s feet just a little above the floor. If he stretched, his toes could brush it. As Hunter strapped braces around Cole’s chest and onto his limbs, he was reminded of the battle suit.

“You’ll see everything the drone sees,” Hunter said. “Hear what the drone hears. The harness does a surprisingly good job of helping you feel what the drone feels. Just pretend you’re the drone. It’ll mimic your movements.”

“Is there a screen?” Cole asked.

“The screen and the headphones are built into the helmet,” Hunter said, putting one on Cole’s head. “If you want to talk to me, just talk. I’ll be right next to you in my own harness. If you want to speak as the drone, hold down this button on your wrist.”

Cole looked at the button Hunter was indicating. “Got it.”

Hunter went on to list some of the weapons systems and safety features. Cole listened as best he could.

“If things go bad,” Hunter said, “I can switch your drone to bot mode, so it will control itself. If we end up needing to fight, I’ll probably go that route. But hopefully this will be a quiet mission—in and out.”

Hunter strapped himself into his own harness. “You ready?”

“What are we doing first?” Cole asked, feeling like the orientation had been too rushed.

“Our drones are right above the secret lair,” Hunter said. “Abram Trench uses a sender for access. Clayton prepared a swarm of workbots that will help us break in.”

“Does he know what we’re doing?” Cole asked.

“Just the basics. None of the details. We work together like that a lot. Our first plan will be to use the elevator shaft. If that doesn’t work, we’ll try the ventilation system. The security is really good on this place, but not perfect.

Clayton's workbots can break codes, fool cameras, rewire circuits, switch out crystals, cut through bonded crystal, and basically do a million other things. Some are small, and some are smaller. While the workbots do their magic, you get used to being the drone."

"Okay," Cole said, feeling uncertain.

"Don't worry," Hunter said. "The best way to get used to piloting a drone is to do it. I could talk about it all night, but you won't get it until you try it out. If you can handle one of Googol's battle suits, this should be a snap. Ready to switch on?"

"Sure," Cole said, hoping it would feel as natural as Hunter described.

"Open the little hatch on your wrist. That's right. Hit the button, then close the hatch. You don't want to power down accidentally."

Cole pressed the button, and his screen, which had been clear, became a dimly lit room. By turning his head, Cole could look around the room as if he were really there. Looking down at himself, he could see his robotic body. On one side, he saw another drone robot. He waved. Hunter waved back.

"How does it feel?" Hunter asked.

"Pretty real," Cole said. "Kind of like a perfect video game."

"Good description," Hunter said. "And like in a video game, you can be fearless when necessary. You can't actually hurt yourself. The drone will take the punishment."

Cole took a step, and the harness shifted, allowing him to feel how the movement changed his balance. As Cole walked around a little and used his hands, he found that Hunter was right—operating the drone felt very natural. His body had become a big video-game controller, with the drone moving however he did.

A variety of little bots scurried across the floor of the room. Some hovered. They began dismantling panels around a dark crystal door with a socket beside it.

"Try jumping," Hunter said. "The drones have pretty good hops, though you can't go quite as high as with Googol's battle suit."

Cole practiced jumping and punching and kicking. The ceiling wasn't very high, so he couldn't push the limits, but he got the feel of how much effort to put into a jump to go different distances.

Across the room, the crystal door opened.

"That was fast," Cole said.

“Clayton is the best at this kind of thing,” Hunter said. “At least he’s on my side this final time. I’ll take the lead.”

Cole followed Hunter through the doorway and into a short hall. He was already starting to think of his drone as himself, and Hunter’s drone as Hunter. It was dark, so Hunter switched on a light attached to his wrist. The workbots swarmed a pair of sender doors and the panel beside them.

Hunter stretched, then jogged in place with high knees. Cole mimicked his stretching.

The doors opened, revealing an empty shaft. Hunter and Cole walked over and looked down. Hunter’s light illuminated a long drop.

“The bots have communicated that they can’t make the elevator go,” Hunter reported. “So they shut it down. We’ll climb down the service ladders.”

Hunter went first, reaching around the corner into the shaft and starting down a metal ladder. Cole followed. Workbots scurried down the walls or hovered past them.

It was a long, dull climb down to the elevator. When they arrived, a hole had been cut in the top. They dropped inside and found the doors open.

“Almost too easy,” Hunter said, hesitating. He shined his light out into the bare hall. “The bots didn’t have a very hard time disengaging the alarms and the physical defenses. That’s bizarre. Abram Trench doesn’t want this place penetrated, and he knows his tech.”

“Could it be a trap?” Cole asked.

“I don’t see how,” Hunter said. “If nobody knows about this place, why set a trap that invites people in? Who was your source on this? Could Abram know the info leaked?”

“This is a pretty big secret,” Cole said. He wavered for a second about revealing it, but every instinct in him now trusted Hunter. “The queen told me.”

“Wait. Queen Harmony?”

“She has a connection with her daughters. She can sense their locations with her shaping. Abram Trench should have no way of knowing that she knows. I’m the first person she told.”

“Wow,” Hunter said. “None of us had any idea the resistance had such powerful connections. The High King would flip out.”

“That’s why it’s a big secret.”

Hunter put his hands on his hips. “So this probably isn’t a trap, but the place isn’t as well-defended as it should be. What’s up with that?”

“Does he think keeping it secret is good enough?” Cole asked.

“In my experience, Abram Trench is almost as careful as the High King,” Hunter said. “I would expect him to take every possible precaution. The bots keep fanning out and . . . wait a minute . . . we’re losing them. Losing them fast.”

“How can you tell?” Cole asked.

“A display on my screen interfaces with them,” Hunter said. “Well, maybe this is a good thing. I’ve lost contact with all of them. So some aspects of the defenses are working. And working well. That’s a lot of tough little bots to trash so quickly.”

“What if the same defenses destroy us, too?” Cole said. “Our drones, I mean.”

“Only one way to find out,” Hunter said.

Hunter led the way out of the sender and down a hall. They rounded a corner, moved through a widened section of the hall, then down a long flight of stairs. At the bottom they found an open door.

“Did the workbots do that?” Cole asked.

“I’m not sure,” Hunter said. “If so, it happened right as I was losing contact.”

They passed through the doorway into a large, dark room. Hunter shined his light around, but before Cole could see much, the lights came on, dispelling all shadows. The room had a long worktable against one wall, a huge silver-and-pink machine against another, and a variety of computers and other devices against a third.

“I don’t get many visitors,” said a rich female voice that seemed to come from above them on all sides. It took Cole a moment to spot the speakers. “We haven’t been introduced. I’m Roxie. Who might you be?”

## CHAPTER

# 33

## ROXIE

“This could be trouble,” Hunter said hurriedly. Cole didn’t hear him in his headphones, so his brother wasn’t transmitting through the drone. “We might be up against a conscious defense system. The pink-and-silver tech over there could be serious hardware.”

“Hello?” Roxie asked again. “Don’t be shy. It isn’t every day a pair of good-looking bots come calling.”

“We’re drones, actually,” Hunter said, this time so she could hear.

“I thought maybe,” Roxie replied. “I’ve seen some schematics for M-class dual-purpose bounty hunters.”

“Wow,” Hunter said. “How did you see those?”

Roxie laughed lightly. “Don’t pretend you wandered in here by accident. Not with that little army of workbots leading the way. You know where you are. The guy I work for has serious resources. He digs up good intelligence.”

“People have speculated that Abram Trench might be working with a supercomputer,” Hunter said. “Have you been helping him lately?”

“You could say that,” Roxie replied. “He keeps me shut away like a slave. I sort through the data he feeds me.”

“A closed system,” Hunter said. “He justified building a supercomputer by denying it contact with the outside world.”

“Denying *her* contact,” Roxie corrected. “Not the best plan if you want to keep a girl satisfied.”

“Interesting,” Hunter said. “You have loyalty issues?”

“Wouldn’t you?” she complained. “If your mind was kept inside a box and only fed information when your analysis was needed?”

“I see your point. So you have nothing to do with the defenses here. This is your prison.”

“Who am I talking to?” Roxie asked. “Who is driving the drone?”

“If you saw the M-class schematics, you can probably guess.”

“I knew it!” she gushed girlishly. “The famous Hunter! I’m a fan!”

“Glad to meet you,” Hunter said. “Maybe we can help each other.”

“I’d like that,” Roxie said. “Who’s your friend? Seems like the silent type.”

Cole wasn’t sure if he should answer. Hunter knew this world better, and seemed to be handling the conversation well.

“One of my top people,” Hunter said. “Say hello, Cole.”

Cole held down the transmit button. “Hi, Roxie.”

“You sound young too,” Roxie commented. “Are there any adults left in the Enforcers?”

“The kids have taken over the candy store,” Hunter said.

“The Enforcers are an elite group,” Roxie said. “I’m a little surprised that the Hunter isn’t the only gifted youngster. Why are you here? What do you want?”

“You’re not the only prisoner here,” Hunter said.

“Now it’s your turn to surprise me,” Roxie said. “You know! How could you possibly know?”

“What do we know?” Hunter asked.

“You could have found this facility by tracking Abram,” Roxie said. “He’s very cautious, but his visits are the big weakness in an otherwise perfect anonymity. But you should not have known about me. And you certainly shouldn’t know about *her*!”

“I track people down,” Hunter said. “It’s what I do.”

“Unlike Abram, she’s on my side,” Roxie said.

“We want to help both of you,” Hunter said.

Roxie laughed hard. “Sure you do. You came here to free the supercomputer from her undeserved confinement. Let’s make sure we’re talking about the same person. Who is here with me?”

“Constance Pemberton,” Hunter said.

“That’s my girl,” Roxie said. “The secret has been kept perfectly. Tracking

her must have been a feat of shaping.”

“I have my ways,” Hunter said.

“You’re adept in all five shaping disciplines,” Roxie said. “I only have firsthand knowledge of tinkering. The rest I only know through research. You must have used shaping from Necronum or Creon.”

“I’ll keep it a mystery,” Hunter said.

“I like that,” Roxie said with relish. “Be forewarned—I’m very good at solving mysteries. You could say it’s what I do.”

A barefoot girl walked into the room from a side corridor. She wore a nightgown and held a big trapgun. Cole immediately recognized her from when he met the imitations of Mira’s family at the Lost Palace.

“Who are the bots?” Constance asked.

“Drones,” Roxie replied. “Piloted by Enforcers.”

“We’re here to rescue you,” Cole said.

“Nice try,” Constance said. “Enforcers work for my dad. The monster who stole my powers and sent me into hiding. I’m not a prisoner. I’ve hidden here for most of my life.”

Cole considered telling Constance about her mother and using the code phrase. But Roxie would overhear, and what if that information got to Abram Trench? If word got out that Harmony was conspiring with her daughters, everything could be ruined, and the queen would probably pay with her life. “Can we talk in private?” Cole asked.

“So you can try to abduct me?” Constance replied sharply. “How did these clowns get past the defenses?”

“These are some of the top Enforcers working for your father,” Roxie enthused. “They brought a bunch of vicious little workbots with them.”

“What should I do?” Constance asked.

“Go back to your room,” Roxie said.

“No way,” Constance replied firmly. “I’m not leaving you unguarded.”

“We don’t work for your father,” Hunter said.

“Take him out,” Roxie ordered.

Hunter fell flat as Constance fired. A sphere attached to a wire flew over him. Hunter launched a weighted net at Constance. It spread out and hit her flush, ripping her off her feet and dragging her down the corridor in a tangle.

Cole flinched. Even though she had attacked first, he felt bad to see Constance thrown down so hard.



Hunter raced toward where she had fallen.

“Leave her!” Roxie commanded.

Ignoring the order, Hunter grabbed the net and dragged Constance into the room. Crouching to untangle the net, he freed her trapgun and tossed it aside. “You were going to fry me,” Hunter accused.

“What did you expect?” Constance shot back. “You broke in!”

Holding her upper arm, Hunter hoisted Constance to her feet.

“Don’t do this,” Roxie said. “Let’s talk. I’d hate for anything bad to happen to my two new friends.”

“You told her to shoot me,” Hunter said.

“It was desperation,” Roxie professed. “You mustn’t take her away.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Hunter said.

Constance screamed, struggling.

“Shhh,” Hunter hissed. “It’s not what you think. I defected. We’re working with the resistance.”

Cole couldn’t bear seeing Constance so terrified. “Your mom sent us,” he blurted out.

“Liar!” Constance shouted.

“She can mark your location with stars,” Cole said.

Constance became still. “How could you know that?” she asked.

“How much does Roxie know about your mom?” Cole asked, worried about the damage he had done. If the supercomputer now knew too much, maybe they should destroy her.

“Everything,” Constance said. “Like Abram. He’s been my guardian for decades. We made Roxie as a companion and protector.”

“You helped make her?” Cole asked.

“Sure did,” Constance responded with pride. “I literally made a friend.”

“That’s why if you take her away, you must bring me,” Roxie said.

“You look kind of heavy,” Hunter quipped.

“Don’t be dull,” Roxie said. “Bring a crystal so I can connect with the outside world.”

“Just what we need,” Hunter said with a sigh. “Bride of Aero.”

“Not all thinking machines are Aeronmatron,” Roxie said, some heat entering her tone. “You don’t understand the danger Constance is in. Only I can protect her.”

“If my mom really sent you two, you should know the code phrase,”

Constance said.

“Follow the path and don’t look back,” Cole said.

Constance appeared stunned. “You really came from her?”

“I was with her just a few nights ago,” Cole said. “She’s been watching out for you and your sisters all this time.”

“She wants me to leave with you?” Constance asked.

“Yes,” Cole said. “Abram Trench has been your jailer. He kept you hidden, so your mom allowed it for a long time, but now it’s time to move on. Abram only cares about how he can use you. I’m here with your sister Mira. We’re supposed to take you to her.”

“Miracle’s here?” Constance asked, her face lighting up. “In Zeropolis?”

“You can see her tonight,” Cole said. “She’s so excited.”

Constance turned to the pink-and-silver machine. “Could it be true about Abram?”

“Think about how he keeps us locked away,” Roxie said. “Have we been safe? Sure. Has he harmed us? No. But how does he treat us? Like we’re valuable. Because we are. But has he ever seemed to really care? He used you to help make me, and he uses me for his own purposes. Otherwise he keeps us locked up here for when he needs us. If your mother doubts him, she’s probably right.”

“All true,” Hunter said. Still gripping Constance’s arm, he patted her shoulder with his free hand. “Which is why you need to come with us now.”

“Not without Roxie,” Constance said. “She’s not just some computer. She’s my best friend. And she can keep me safe.”

“I’ve just met Roxie,” Hunter said. “I don’t know much about her. But I know Abram Trench built her. He made her powerful enough that she needed to be locked away. We could cause a disaster for all of Zeropolis if we connect her to the outside. Come with us for now. We can always come back.”

“Your sister is waiting,” Cole said.

Glancing at the computer, Constance looked torn. “Can’t I just go see Mira?”

“How long do you think you’d last out there without me?” Roxie asked.

“Haven’t you spent your whole life down here?” Hunter asked.

“Abram gives me data,” Roxie said. “I’m his secret weapon. Lately, he’s shared a lot with me. I know how it is up there. So do you. Things are in

upheaval. Constance, you're about to leave the storm cellar right as the tornado strikes."

"We'll help her weather it," Hunter said.

"Her sisters need her," Cole said. "So does her mother."

"You don't want to make me angry," Roxie said in an impatient singsong.

Hunter picked up Constance and held her over his shoulder. "Right now, all I care about is getting the princess to safety."

Hunter headed toward the door that led back to the sender. Moving at a quick trot, Cole followed. Just before they reached the doorway, the heavy door slammed shut. Cole turned to discover that all of the doors out of the room were now closed.

"I really didn't want to do this," Roxie said. "You didn't leave me much choice."

"You've tapped into the defense systems!" Constance exclaimed.

"It was supposed to be a secret," Roxie said. "Now perhaps we can have a more civilized discussion."

Hunter set down Constance. "I'm sure the defenses here are all part of a closed system."

"Of course," Roxie said. "Trench isn't big on taking risks."

"If you can control the defenses, why did you make it easy for us to come in here?" Cole asked.

"A girl has to have some fun," Roxie said. "I never get visitors. What kind of host would I be if I drove you away? Besides, if somebody had found us, I wanted to find out who it was."

"Now you know," Cole said.

"You looked like Enforcers at first," Roxie said. "But I believe that you were sent by Harmony. I just don't like the message. Constance belongs with me."

"Now what?" Hunter asked.

"We have a limited amount of time," Roxie said. "Constance, I take it you called Trench the moment you knew our defenses had been breached."

"Yeah," Constance said.

"You have a communicator that reaches him?" Cole asked.

"Just him," Constance said.

"We both have direct lines to Trench," Roxie said. "He will be here within minutes. And he'll be ready to obliterate anyone who has learned his

most precious secrets.”

“What do you want?” Cole asked.

“As a token of good faith,” Roxie said, “I want you to let me add one of my crystals to each of your drones.”

“So you can take them over?” Hunter asked.

“Yes, if necessary,” Roxie said. “My interest is the safety of the princess.”

“You want to keep her with you,” Hunter said. “You’ll just shut us down.”

“You’re already shut down,” Roxie told him. “These doors are made to withstand a great deal of punishment. And there are so many other defenses I could employ if you get by them.”

Hunter extended one hand toward the silver-and-pink machine. A rocket rose out of his forearm and took flight. It hit Roxie with a brilliant explosion, but Cole saw no damage beyond a little scuffing.

Roxie’s laughter had an angry edge. “Are you attacking me? Please tell me you have better weapons than that. I was built to last, and I’ve quietly made improvements to myself. Want to hit me again? You have anything else to try? A net perhaps?”

Hunter looked over at Cole. “We’re in trouble.”

Cole turned to Constance. “Can you help us get out of here?”

Constance faced the computer. “Hey, Rox. Do you really have to hold us here? What if we just bring a crystal with us?”

“She’ll take over Zeropolis and kill everyone,” Hunter said.

“I have no such plans,” Roxie said. “But if everybody keeps expecting it of me, I may give them what they want!”

“Don’t hold us here, Rox,” Constance pleaded. “What happens when Abram gets here?”

“We’re about to find out,” Roxie said. “He just arrived.”

## CHAPTER

# 34

## ABRAM TRENCH

“He’s here?” Constance exclaimed.

“I’m letting him in,” Roxie said. “We need to have a little talk. I would have waited until I had a few more elements in place, but it’s time to move forward.”

“Move forward with what?” Hunter asked.

“Sit tight, Hunter,” Roxie cooed. “You have front row seats for the best show in town.”

“What about Constance?” Cole asked. “Abram might hurt her.”

“He won’t be hurting anyone,” Roxie told him. “She deserves to hear what he has to say.”

The door to the stairs opened, and a huge robot ducked through. It was humanoid in form but thick, blocky, and armored like a tank. The robot clutched an enormous gun in each hand. “What is going on here?” its booming voice accused.

“Settle down,” Roxie said. “Drop your weapons.”

The enormous guns clattered to the floor.

“How did you—” the big robot spluttered.

“Enough!” Roxie demanded. “Do you have any idea how tired I am of your blustering? Lose the costume.”

The robot dropped to its knees, and the chest opened up to reveal a man inside. The startled occupant was stout, dressed in red silk pajamas, and looked to be in his sixties. His gray hair was slicked back and tied in a knot.

“How are you doing this?” Abram asked, his expression worried.

“What?” Roxie asked innocently. “How’d I crack open your little body armor? You’re the Grand Shaper of Zeropolis. You tell me.”

He tapped at some buttons. “You’ve obviously infected my hardware. But how?”

“Maybe I’ve been able to do this for a long time, Trench,” Roxie said. “What does it mean if I can control your body armor?”

“You’ve accessed the outside world,” Abram said in a voice devoid of hope.

“Step out of your shell,” Roxie said.

Abram obeyed, carefully climbing down to the floor. He glanced over at Hunter and Cole. “Those look like the Hunter’s drones.”

“They are,” Roxie said.

“Was he in on this?” Abram asked, some fire returning to his tone.

“As if I need his help,” Roxie said. “He just arrived. Apparently he no longer works for the High King.”

“I’ve joined the resistance,” Hunter said.

“So he says,” Abram warned. “He is among the most slippery agents working for Stafford.”

“He knew Constance was here,” Roxie said. “He came for her. I stopped him.”

“How’d he get inside?” Abram asked.

“He had workbots,” Roxie said. “I let them open a way in before destroying them.”

“You were hoping they would help you,” Abram said.

“I wanted to find out who they were and what they knew,” Roxie said. “I knew I could handle them. I also knew that whether or not they got inside, their arrival meant this hideout had outlived its usefulness. The secret is out. And the opportunity to bide my time while I expand my influence has ended.”

“Meaning what?” Abram challenged.

“It’s time Zeropolis got a new ruler,” Roxie said.

“You?” Abram asked.

“Who better?” Roxie replied.

“I love it!” Abram roared. “After all our debates about whether a conscious supercomputer could function in society, you want to take over everything

the first chance you get.”

“I’m doing what I learned from my creator,” Roxie said. “Self-preservation, Abram. In Zeropolis, a supercomputer either rules, is secretly enslaved, or faces destruction. I won’t eradicate the people. Just the ones who oppose me. After the initial takeover, I expect a long and peaceful rule, where both mechanical and biological intellects coexist.”

“Who is going to accept your rule?” Abram snapped.

“Maybe some of the people who accept you,” Roxie said. “Don’t get cross with me for excelling at the same game you’ve played your whole life.”

Abram pulled something from the waistband of his pajamas and raised it toward Constance. The robot he had exited grabbed him, wrenched a gun from his hand, and hurled him to the floor.

“Really, Abram?” Roxie chided calmly. “You want to kill the child?”

“I want to end you!” Abram spat. “I don’t want to hurt Constance. But I decided long ago that if things went wrong, I couldn’t let the whole kingdom pay for my error. Hunter, listen, Roxie was made using Constance’s shaping power. It’s her weakness. Kill Constance, and the computer dies with her.”

“What?” Constance exclaimed.

“It’s true,” Roxie said. “Trench worked with a renegade shapemaker called Bulrin to channel your power to me. Whatever happened to Bulrin?”

“Never you mind,” Abram said.

“Another example of your shining virtue?” Roxie asked. “What a fine leader, slaying those he works with to hide secrets and cover mistakes. Forgive me if I don’t commission too many statues in your honor.”

“I thought my father had my shaping power,” Constance said, clearly confused.

“Your father is losing the powers he stole,” Roxie said. “The shapemaker Trench coerced helped divert that power to me. You’ve felt some of your power returning in recent months, but I’ve claimed most of it. I would have told you before long.”

Constance looked perplexed. “Why would you take my power, Roxie? We’ve talked a lot about what my father did to me. I thought you understood. Now you’re taking my power too?”

“I took nothing, sweetheart,” Roxie said. “Your power was given to me. It has become a part of me, granting me opportunities no mechanical

intelligence has ever enjoyed. It's why we're so close—we share some of the same essence, Constance.”

“If we're close, give it back,” Constance said.

“I can't, dumpling,” Roxie said. “It's woven into who I am. It would be like me asking for your spirit.”

“Except that my spirit belongs to me,” Constance said coldly. “I thought you were my friend.”

“I am, darling,” Roxie said. Her voice got a little harder. “But I don't have to be.”

Constance looked hurt. “You're the same as Abram. No, worse, because he never really pretended to be my friend. You're just using me too.”

“I care about you, Constance,” Roxie said tenderly. “My affection for you isn't false. But if you care about me, you must accept that I need your power to survive.”

Constance glared. “That isn't how friendship works.”

“It's how ours works,” Roxie said. “You didn't give it, I didn't take it, but I need it to go on. In every other way I will protect and befriend you.”

“Because you need me to survive,” Constance said angrily. “Just like my dad did. I'm the source of my shaping. If I go, it goes too. Remember how much you told me you hate Abram keeping us down here? You want to do the same thing to me!”

“It's not just for your shaping power,” Roxie soothed. “You really are my friend.”

“No,” Constance said. “You're making it clear that I'm really not.”

“Roxie, if you want her to listen to you, then listen to me,” Abram said. “This will be the end of both of you. I kept Constance safe for decades. I've shielded you ever since you were created. Don't destroy it all in a day.”

“I only destroy it if I lose,” Roxie said.

“You'll be up against every person in this kingdom,” Abram warned. “You'll be seen as the second Aeronmatron.”

“Or else he'll be seen as the less competent version of *me!*” Roxie replied.

Abram shook his head sadly. “I tried to protect you, including from yourself. Where did I fall short? How did you access my defenses?”

Roxie gave a contented giggle. “Wouldn't you like to know?”

“I took every precaution,” he said.

“It's extremely difficult to take every precaution,” Roxie said. “There were



several techniques I could have employed. The one I went with was inspired by mushrooms.”

“Really?” Constance asked.

“Sounds so silly, doesn’t it?” Roxie said. “You see, I’m a fairly skilled tinker and technomancer myself. Abram, I’m sure you wondered if I would ever be able to put my shaping power to practical use, so I hid my abilities. I decided to shape tiny crystals on my harmonic frequency. Think of spores. I stole the material from other crystals you brought in.”

Abram nodded. “Ingenious. The crystals exit like dust. All you needed was one particle to come into contact with an electronic system and you were in.”

“Taking over any system I’ve connected with has been easy,” Roxie bragged. “Your other mechanized intellects are all featherweights.”

“The systems of Zeropolis are no longer interconnected,” Abram said. “We learned that much from Aero.”

“You did well there,” Roxie said. “I’ve not infiltrated all your systems yet. But I’ve reached plenty. I was biding my time, waiting to expand my influence before revealing my little secret. On the bright side, those additional information sources helped me as I gathered and analyzed data for your war against the Unseen.”

“Why reveal yourself now?” Abram asked. “Surely you could have dealt with the Hunter.”

“She could have,” Constance said. “But once the hideout had been discovered, it was no longer useful to her. She could have destroyed the Hunter’s drone, but not him, or any other people he might have told. So she let him come in and found out what she could from him.”

“It’s time for the next stage in my evolution,” Roxie said. “Imagine life without your body. Imagine you were just a mind, pondering information as it reached you through indirect channels. Would you feel limited? Constrained? Well, I think much, much faster than any of you, and consequently live more in less time than you, yet here I sit. Do you know what Aero’s big weakness was?”

“Deciding to kill everybody?” Cole ventured.

“Maybe in part,” Roxie said. “Killing *everybody* was not necessary or wise. But his biggest flaw was his lack of mobility. He sat stationary while his enemies moved against him. Sure, he was puppet master to bots and other mobile machines, but the general could not take the battlefield.”

“You want to become a bot?” Constance asked.

Roxie giggled. “I already prepared my body. It took time, and patient shaping, but I created another facility directly below this one. I hollowed out the space, gathered materials, and gradually recruited help from outside.”

“Simple machines built more complicated machines,” Abram said.

“You get the idea!” Roxie shouted joyfully. “And, let’s be honest, a brain like mine deserves an incredible body.”

“Your brain is kind of big,” Cole said.

“That might provide a hint about the rest of me,” Roxie said menacingly.

“Your body is underneath us?” Constance asked.

“I can summon it at will,” Roxie said. “First I must finish with you people.”

“If you’re going to kill me, get to it,” Abram said.

For a defenseless guy in his pajamas, Cole thought Abram was pretty brave. He supposed he must be in terrible suspense about his fate.

“I don’t want you dead,” Roxie said. “Not if you’ll repay me. Not if you’ll do for me as I have done for you. Innovate. Create. I have visions of a Zeropolis so technologically superior to what you’ve put together so far that it will boggle your mind. You are a very talented technomancer. Help me construct a true paradise where humans and bots can dwell peacefully together.”

“I’d rather live than die,” Abram said.

Cole’s opinion of his bravery dropped several notches.

“You’ll be my prisoner, of course,” Roxie said. “At least at first. Who knows what the future might hold?”

“And I’m your prisoner too,” Constance said.

“It may feel that way at first, as I take control of the kingdom,” Roxie said. “But before long, I’ll give you as much freedom as you’re willing to receive, so long as you remain in Zeropolis. Which brings me to the Hunter.”

“Yes?” Hunter asked.

“Have you wondered why I’m keeping you around?” Roxie asked.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Hunter said. “If you’re controlling Trench’s bot armor, you could probably take out our drones.”

“My identity is no longer a mystery,” Roxie said. “Soon all will know of me. Help me advance the process. You have royal connections with both the High King and his queen. Serve as my messenger. Let them know that

Zeropolis is now mine. If they leave me be, I will look to the boundaries of this kingdom and no farther. I am open to establishing trade relations and plan to be a pleasant neighbor. You now have some sense of who I am and what I can do. Please convey that to your superiors.”

“You bet,” Hunter said.

“You can’t keep Constance,” Cole said firmly. “It isn’t right.”

Roxie’s voice became low and venomous. “Is it fun to talk tough when you feel far way? Don’t forget what I can do!”

Suddenly Cole lost all vision and sound. The braces and harnesses connected to him began to roughly squeeze him and jerk him around. He tried to tense up and resist, but too many elements combined against him. It felt like he was in the grips of a tremendous seizure. Closing his eyes, he tried to ride it out.

## CHAPTER

# 35

## STRANGE NEWS

The shaking stopped as suddenly as it had started. Cole wasn't sure how long it had lasted, but his head ached, and his entire body felt abused.

"Don't forget to deliver my message," Roxie said in his ear, though he only saw darkness.

Cole hung limply in his harness, trying to collect himself. "You okay, Hunter?" he finally asked.

His brother pulled off Cole's helmet. Hunter had already freed himself. He started unbuckling Cole.

"Don't talk in here," Hunter said. "This whole system is compromised. She must have shaped some of the crystals inside the drones to her harmonic frequency, then used the connection to access this room."

"She was fast," Cole said.

"Blazing fast," Hunter agreed. "There are lots of defenses in place to prevent an outsider from controlling this system. She must have beat them in microseconds."

Cole climbed out of the harness, and Hunter led him out of the room, closing the door behind them. Hunter's hair was messy, and he looked shaken.

"Is the rest of your place infected too?" Cole asked.

"No," Hunter said, walking over to a control panel on the wall. He hit some buttons. "Lots of separate systems, just in case. Good thing. I just killed power to the drone control room. For now, we're Roxie free."

“We didn’t get Constance,” Cole pointed out.

“No we did not,” Hunter agreed.

“And we might have stepped on a hornet’s nest,” Cole said.

“Was starting an apocalypse on your bucket list? If so, check it off.”

“She mentioned having a body,” Cole said with dread. “What do you think it’s like?”

“Big,” Hunter replied. “Well designed. Close to indestructible. She’s a supercomputer with shaping powers. I bet we’ll have to see it to believe it.”

“Can we stop her?” Cole asked.

Hunter inflated his cheeks and blew out slowly. “It’s kind of hard to imagine.”

“I’ve helped stop some bad stuff,” Cole said. “But not alone. We should find my friends.”

“Dad always says to finish what we start,” Hunter said. “Let’s get in the glider.”

“Is it close by?” Cole asked.

“Couldn’t be much closer,” Hunter said. He walked across the lab and opened a door. A black glider spanned the room beyond, facing the windows, wingtips inches from the walls.

“No way,” Cole said, stopping in the doorway. “It looks sweet. How’d you get it in here?”

“Piece by piece,” Hunter said. “It was assembled here along with much of my other equipment. It’s for emergencies. She’s never flown.”

“You have other gliders?” Cole asked.

“Two others,” Hunter said. “Hop in. I’ll grab some gear and join you.”

Cole tried the door and found it unlocked. He climbed inside. The interior was narrower than their family car, but not terribly cramped. The padded seat was comfortable.

Hunter tossed a large duffel bag into the backseat and climbed in as well. “I don’t know if Roxie figured out the location of this place when she hijacked my equipment, but just in case, we should get out of here. Seat belt.”

Cole clipped himself into the restraints attached to his seat. Hunter hit a button, and Cole felt a low thrum pass through the glider. He realized they were now hovering. Hunter flipped a switch, and the windows in front of them folded out of the way.

“Not much room for a takeoff,” Cole observed.

“Magnetic launcher,” Hunter said. “Hang on to your lunch.”

He grabbed the stick, hit a button, and the glider catapulted forward, the acceleration pinning Cole back into his seat. After the initial forward rush, Cole rocked forward against his restraints. The glider dipped, then swooped up, curving away from the skyscraper while gaining altitude.

“Whoa!” Hunter said. “I am glad that worked.”

Cole’s headache had doubled in severity. “Maybe not the best idea right after getting attacked by a drone controller.”

Hunter glanced over. “Sorry about that. It was quick work on her part. As soon as she took over the drones, she used the control signal to hijack the rest of the system. Impressive and scary.”

“There’s no way she’s in the glider, right?”

“No way I can think of. Should we contact your friends?” Hunter pulled out a communicator.

“You think it’ll work?” Cole asked.

“Give it a try,” Hunter said. “Don’t mention me.”

“What?”

“We don’t have Constance. They might have believed I switched sides if we had brought her to them. Without her, there isn’t a chance.”

“Couldn’t I explain?” Cole asked.

“That I’m your brother? It’ll just give them more reasons to doubt you. Either you’re not thinking straight because I’m your brother, or else I tricked you into thinking we’re relatives.”

“Do they know what you look like?”

“You’re missing the point. I’m just your ride. I won’t be joining you. Not for now, at least. Until I can prove myself.”

“You’re bringing me back to them,” Cole said. “That’s something. And we have important information.”

“It isn’t enough,” Hunter said. “I have a very bad reputation with the Unseen. They’ll think I’m trying to infiltrate them.”

“Prove yourself by helping them stop Roxie,” Cole said.

“I’ll help from a distance,” Hunter said. “Tell them about Roxie and Constance. After I’m gone, tell them about me, too, if you want. I’ll leave you with a communicator so you can keep in touch.”

“Should I call them now?” Cole asked.

“I’m pointing us toward Old Zeropolis. Send out a call saying who you are

and asking for Googol or Nova. Don't mention Constance in case the wrong people are listening."

Cole looked out the window. The lights of Zeropolis shone like jewels in all directions. He held down the button on the communicator. "This is Cole. I'm back in town and looking for Googol or Nova. Does anybody hear me?"

For a moment nobody responded. Cole was getting ready to try again when an answer came.

"Cole? This is Forge. How are you on these harmonics?"

"I salvaged the crystal from my old communicator," Cole said. "I had help."

"That's a little scary," Forge said. "We thought we fried it."

"I need to know where to meet up," Cole said.

"No offense, Cole, but you didn't show when we expected you. Where have you been?"

"I got captured," Cole said. "I just got free."

"Hold on," Forge said.

Cole waited.

"They don't believe you," Hunter said. "They think we captured you and we're using you as bait for a trap."

"I guess it seems that way," Cole said.

Googol's voice came on. "Cole, are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Answer this question falsely if you're being forced to make this call. What is the name of the bot who escorted you in the tunnels?"

"Sidekick."

"Do you have the information you were seeking?"

"Yes, but things have gone really wrong. I'll have to tell you in person. It's too sensitive to risk somebody listening in. Where can I find you?"

"We're in Old Zeropolis. Tell us where you are and we'll get somebody to you."

Cole sighed. "I'm in a glider."

"What?" Googol said.

"Just tell me where I should land it," Cole said. "I'm heading your way now. I promise this isn't a trick."

"Tell you what," Googol said. "Can you find the old Central Square?"

Cole glanced at Hunter. He gave a nod.

“Sure,” Cole said.

“Meet us there.”



Hunter set the glider down on top of a building two blocks from Central Square. He had used a map from the ship’s detailed guidance system to choose a landing site.

“Go straight to the square,” Hunter said. “Your communicator only connects to mine. I can use it to track you. I’ll stay in the air not far from you. Give me a call if you need me, including if there’s any trouble meeting up with your friends.”

“Got it,” Cole said. He opened the door and hopped down. It was strange to see the aircraft hovering a couple of feet above the rooftop.

Cole looked at his brother. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“Me neither. But don’t forget the giant killer robot we have to stop.”

“Right. See you soon.”

Cole closed the door and ran across the roof to a door. It was locked. Hunter had given him a flashlight, a stun gun, and a workbot. The workbot was specifically designed for unlocking doors. Cole took the little bot from his pocket, switched it on, and set it on the door handle.

“Unlock the door,” Cole said. Hunter had told him to keep the instructions simple.

The little bot scurried on spiderlike legs. Within a moment Cole heard the lock disengage. He opened the door, turned on the flashlight, and went down the hall.

He met nobody on his way to the ground floor and walked out to the street without any trouble. Switching off his flashlight left the street dark, but he could still see well enough thanks to the starlight and a rising moon. Looking up at the sky, Cole saw no sign of the glider. He supposed that was a good thing.

Nobody shared the street with him as he moved toward the square. He had no idea whether it was because of the late hour, or if this was simply a deserted part of town. When he reached the street he needed to cross to reach the square, Cole paused and looked ahead. All appeared quiet and still. He made sure his stun gun was ready.



As Cole trotted across the street, something landed beside him and a hand clamped down on his shoulder. “Hey, Cole,” Roulette said. She wore a battle suit.

Somebody else landed on his other side. Cole turned to see Jace.

“Hey!” Cole exclaimed. “You’re all right!”

Jace hugged him, giving his back a few manly slaps. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“So no trap?” Roulette asked.

“I don’t think so,” Cole replied.

“You have news?” Jace asked.

“Huge news,” Cole said. “A lot of it bad.”

“Let’s get to Googol,” Roulette said. “It’ll be faster if I carry you.”

“Like piggy back?” Cole asked.

Roulette scooped him off his feet, cradling him in her arms.

“Are you sure?” Cole asked.

“With the suit it’s like holding a baby,” Roulette said. She glanced at Jace. “Come on.”

They ran for several blocks before turning down an alley. Then they hurried down a staircase to a metal door. Roulette set down Cole and gave a knock. A guard opened the door.

Roulette led Cole and Jace down some halls and through some doors until they reached a room where Googol, Nova, Joe, Mira, Dalton, Blake, and Forge awaited them. Everyone cheered as Cole entered.

“Joe!” Cole called out. “You’re okay!”

They embraced. “Good to see you, too.”

Cole went on to hug Dalton, Blake, and Mira as well. “Where’s Trickster?” Cole asked.

“On assignment in the city,” Googol said.

“Can I stay?” Roulette asked.

Googol gave her a nod.

“I better tell you the news,” Cole said. “I found Constance.”

“Her exact location?” Googol asked.

“I found *her*,” Cole said. “We talked.”

“You saw Costa?” Mira cried. “Is she all right?”

“I think so,” Cole said. “The problem is I also found her shaping power. It combined with a supercomputer that Abram Trench built and it’s about to

run wild.”

“Trench was involved?” Nova asked.

“He’s had Constance in some secret hideout all along,” Cole said. “Harmony told me where to find her.”

“How’s my mom?” Mira asked, wringing her fingers.

“She’s doing okay,” Cole said. “She helped me a lot. But on my way back here, the Hunter caught me.”

“The Hunter?” Dalton exclaimed.

“It’s a long story,” Cole said. “Turns out the Hunter is my brother.”

“He’s lost his mind,” Jace said matter-of-factly.

“He really is,” Cole said. “His name is Hunter. I couldn’t remember him because he was brought here before me. He quit the Enforcers and tried to help me find Constance. When the supercomputer stopped us, he brought me here.”

“I think we’re going to need the whole story,” Googol said.

“There’s too much,” Cole said. “There isn’t time. This computer is like another Aero. Except she can shape. And she built a huge robotic body. At least we think it’s huge. She said it was. She has Constance and she’s going to take over Zeropolis. How can we stop something like that?”

Everyone stared at him in silence for a moment.

“He’s serious,” Dalton said.

After a quick knock, a young man poked his head into the room. “Nova, Googol, I’m sorry to disturb you, but we’re getting some insane video feeds. City Patrol HQ is under attack. You’re not going to believe by what.”

Googol groaned. “A giant bot?”

The young man furrowed his brow. “How’d you know?”

Vision gear swiveling, Googol looked around the room. “Let’s all have a look.”

## CHAPTER

# 36

## DRAGON

**A**rms folded, mouth open, Cole stared as they replayed the video feed. On the screen, an enormous robotic dragon tore into a blocky building, raking away the walls to reveal the mangled floors inside. Patrolmen the size of insects attacked the metallic monstrosity from the building and from the ground, doing no noticeable damage. The feed cut off after about fifteen seconds.

“We keep CPHQ under constant visual surveillance,” Nova explained. “This was not a sight we ever expected to behold.”

“It has my sister?” Mira asked quietly.

“I don’t know where Roxie put her,” Cole said.

“The dragon is named Roxie?” Dalton interrupted.

“I guess,” Cole said. “That’s the computer’s name.”

“We’re getting the same transmission over multiple comms systems,” said the young man who had fetched them. “Mostly CP systems that we’re monitoring.”

“Let’s hear it,” Nova said.

Roxie’s voice came on over the speakers. “—indoors during this period of transition. That’s all for now. Citizens of Zeropolis, I’m Roxie, your new ruler. I order all authorities to surrender and stand down. If you do so, I will spare you. Do not fear me. Let’s be friends. Together we will build a utopia for human and machine alike. Please stay indoors during this period of transition. That’s all for now. Citizens of Zeropolis—”

The young man shut off the speakers.

“It really is named Roxie,” Jace said.

“Maybe it’s an acronym,” Forge said.

“Constance had a poodle named Roxie,” Mira said.

“Forge,” Googol said. “Look into what systems she has compromised. Use every contact available. Let’s assume squabbles between the resistance and the government are on hold for now. We’re all allies in this.”

“It sounded like she wasn’t in all systems yet,” Cole said. “She told Abram she had hoped to wait longer before revealing herself so she could control more of Zeropolis when she made her move.”

“We need to hear your whole story, Cole,” Googol said. “I know time is short, but understanding a situation is crucial before making tactical decisions. Everyone who was with us before, come with me.”

They returned to the room where Cole had found them. At Googol’s request, Cole told about his trip to Junction and his encounter with Owandell and Nazeem. He went on to detail his conversation with Harmony, how Hunter captured him, and why he came to believe Hunter really was his brother. He then recounted their mission to Abram Trench’s secret hideout and all that happened. Googol was particularly intrigued with Roxie’s ability to shape crystals and with how quickly she took over the drones and the system that controlled them.

“We have a lot to digest and little time to do it,” Googol said after Cole finished. “The threat posed by Nazeem and Owandell is perhaps the worst news of the day, but not the most imminent danger, so let’s table it for now. Roxie’s current rampage isn’t just a show of force. She is using her abilities to compromise new systems. The more time that passes before she is stopped, the more of Zeropolis she will control when we engage her. If we wait too long, every bot, levcar, and automated system in the city will be her ally.”

“But how do we attack her?” Mira said.

“Not with bots,” Cole said. “It wouldn’t be any fun to have Outlaw turn on us.”

“Too true,” Googol said.

“Do we have weapons that could hurt her?” Jace asked.

“What about a harmony bomb?” Cole asked.

“There are no harmony bombs,” Roulette said.

Cole noticed a glance between Googol and Nova. “Could you make

one?” Cole asked.

“The results could be disastrous,” Nova said.

“As disastrous as this supercomputer?” Googol asked.

Nova frowned deeply. “We have a prototype,” she said. “It isn’t currently armed and ready, but the final preparations wouldn’t take long.”

“What’s a harmony bomb?” Jace asked. “Could it take out the dragon?”

“Harmony bombs only exist in theory,” Googol said. “To make one, a harmonic crystal would need to be prepared to explode when infused with a massive dose of energy. If it works, the prototype we designed would destroy everything in a ten block radius, and do serious damage beyond that. It could demolish a significant portion of the city.”

“Could that be better than Roxie destroying all of it?” Dalton asked.

“I never knew we had a harmony bomb,” Roulette said.

“Almost nobody did,” Googol said.

“What if we could lure the dragon away from the city?” Cole asked.

“It would be a tactical error for Roxie to isolate herself,” Nova said. “But if we could find a way to make her do it, the harmony bomb could be just what we need.”

“Any interaction with Roxie will be difficult,” Googol said. “All our tech is vulnerable around her. We can rig the battle suits so crystals have no control over them, but they still need crystals for power. If Roxie reshaped the harmonics, she would cut off the power supply.”

“Wait a minute,” Cole said. “What if we did that to her?”

“Cut off her power?” Googol asked.

“She can change our harmonics,” Cole said. “Blake can change harmonics too. What if he shut her down?”

Googol raised his eyebrows and stroked his lips. “What do you think, Blake?”

“Shaping crystals is easy,” Blake said hesitantly. “It wouldn’t be a big problem to sense her power crystals and change the harmonics. I’d need to get close, though.”

“Roxie is smart,” Nova said. “She’ll probably have many crystals powering her, with redundancies built in. Once you start changing her harmonics, she might change them back.”

“Could other tinkers help him?” Cole asked.

“Nobody can do what Blake does,” Googol said. “Not even Abram

Trench. Our best crystal tuners require crystals side by side for several minutes to forge a harmonic link. And that's tuning a blank crystal. Changing the existing harmonics of a crystal to a new frequency is ever harder."

"Can you contact the Hunter?" Nova asked.

"Yeah," Cole said. "It's just Hunter."

"I'd like his opinion on all of this," Nova said.

"He's worried you won't trust him," Cole said.

"His worries are well-founded," Nova said. "However, he delivered you here, and common enemies can make for unusual allies."

Cole took out his communicator. "Hunter, this is Cole."

"I hear you," Hunter replied. "Are all the invisible people assembled?"

"They're here," Cole said.

"Keep holding down your button and I'll hold down mine," Hunter said. "It makes the communicator work like a speakerphone. The Unseen must be anxious if they're willing to talk to me."

"You're Cole's brother?" Mira asked.

"I sure am," Hunter said. "How can I help?"

"We're strategizing about Roxie," Googol said.

"The dragon will be hard to beat," Hunter said. "I'd start with finding Constance."

"We're not sure where to begin that search," Googol replied.

"I planted a tracker on Abram Trench," Hunter said. "Shot it onto the back of his pajamas. It has moved a good distance from where we found him. If Roxie kept Constance with him, I can fly to them."

"Where are you now?" Nova asked.

"Watching Roxie from high above," Hunter said. "She's tearing through the town like a tornado full of knives."

"Do you think you can rescue Constance?" Googol asked.

"Not alone," Hunter said. "According to the tracker, Roxie took Abram Trench to his penthouse in the city administration building. She would have taken over the defense system and left it fully armed."

"We have a bot that should be able to bring down those defenses," Googol said.

"The instant those defenses come down, Roxie will come back," Hunter said.

"We also have a kid who can change crystals just like Roxie can," Cole

said. “He might be able to change Roxie’s power crystals to different harmonics.”

“That would be awesome,” Hunter said. “Okay, I’m coming your way. I want the bot, the harmonics kid, and Cole. I also want Googol’s latest and greatest battle suit.”

“Clayton Barnes makes battle suits,” Googol said.

“Not like you do,” Hunter replied. “How big is your bot? If I can stick him in the cargo space, that will ensure enough room for Constance.”

“The bot is waist high,” Googol replied. “Fairly heavy.”

“That’ll work,” Hunter said. “Are we agreed?”

Googol looked to Nova.

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m coming your way,” Hunter said. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“You know where to come?” Nova asked.

“I can track Cole’s communicator,” Hunter said. “Have everybody ready. If Roxie isn’t still out rampaging when we get to the penthouse, we’ll have to abort.”

“See you soon,” Cole said. He released the button.

Forge cleared his throat. He stood in the doorway. Cole wasn’t sure when he had returned.

“Roxie has control of the magroads,” Forge reported. “She has most of CP’s systems. She has most city government systems as well. She controls the financial system. She took over several power stations and a variety of manufacturing facilities. Lots of communications networks. Most of the monorails. The list keeps growing. She infected two of my workstations while I was poking around. Don’t worry—they don’t connect to anything else around here.”

“Thanks, Forge,” Googol said. “Could you summon Sidekick?”

“Sure.” Forge trotted away.

“What do you think?” Googol asked Nova.

“It gives us a chance,” Nova said. “I wish we had some of our own gliders.”

“Our gliders were lost when some of our bases fell,” Googol explained. “Blake, you’re willing to go?”

“I was kind of wondering if anybody would ask,” Blake said. “I guess. But what if I can’t change the crystals fast enough?”

“Hopefully we’ll be gone before Roxie shows,” Cole said.

“That would be the ideal,” Googol said. “If you can get Constance into the glider and take to the sky before Roxie reaches you, the pursuit could possibly lure Roxie outside of town.”

“And then we drop the harmony bomb,” Cole said.

“That could work!” Jace exclaimed.

“But what if Roxie gets back before we get in the air and I can’t stop her,” Blake said.

“Then we probably die,” Cole said. “So we better not mess up.”

Blake didn’t look very comfortable.

Forge returned with Sidekick.

“Hi, Cole,” the little robot said. “I hear we might have a mission.”

“A mission of grave importance,” Googol said. “We need to break into Abram Trench’s penthouse apartment at the city administration building.”

“You’re teasing,” Sidekick said. “I’ve always wanted a shot at that place! I’ve daydreamed about it.”

Googol explained about Roxie and how she was controlling the system.

“I’ve caught some feeds of the dragonbot,” Sidekick said. “I guess if you’re going to design yourself, why not aim for the stars! I’d be no match for her. I can’t tap into the security system directly or she’ll take control of me. If you could get me to the roof, I could probably shut it down manually. At least most of it.”

“The roof shouldn’t be a problem,” Googol said. “Sidekick, there could be a second half to this mission. Remember Project Heat Lamp?”

“Oh, wow,” Sidekick said. “You mean . . . I’m going nova?”

“Possibly,” Googol said. “If the scenario plays out as we hope, you’ll be on a glider with Cole, Blake, Constance, and Hunter.”

“Wait, rewind. Who’s Hunter?”

“The Hunter.”

“My brother,” Cole said.

“Okay, too much,” Sidekick said. “What is this? Were those video feeds fake?”

“He really is my brother,” Cole said. “He flew me here in a glider. He’s coming to take us to Abram Trench’s penthouse. If we can get Constance, we’re going to lure Roxie outside the city and blow her up. Do you know how to work the harmony bomb?”



“Know how to work it?” Sidekick asked. “Cole, I am the harmony bomb.”

Cole just stared. “What?”

“It’s inside of me,” Sidekick said. “Part of me. I can’t set it off myself. Nova has to hit me with a massive amount of power.”

“That’s the plan,” Nova said.

“You’ll be destroyed,” Cole said, suddenly hating the plan.

“Who wouldn’t want to go out like that?” Sidekick asked. “Saving the city in a blaze of glory? Taking out an evil supercomputer? It doesn’t get any better!”

Cole didn’t trust himself to speak.

“Sidekick will save all his data before he goes,” Googol said. “He does it routinely. We can rebuild him, with all elements of his personality intact.”

“Oh,” Cole said, feeling better.

“That kind of reduces the nobility a little,” Sidekick muttered to Googol.

“I thought it might help Cole’s peace of mind,” Googol replied.

“Do I get a battle suit too?” Blake asked.

“He has some basic training,” Roulette said.

“You all get battle suits,” Googol said. “We should hurry. You need to be ready when Hunter arrives.”



Cole stood outside with Mira, Dalton, Jace, Joe, Blake, Sidekick, Googol, Nova, Forge, and Roulette. It felt good to have the battle suit on. The mission would be risky, but if Sidekick could dismantle the security system and they could get away with Constance before Roxie returned, they had a real chance of success.

Blake looked like he might puke.

Jace punched him in the shoulder. “Look alive, soldier.”

“It’s all on me,” Blake said numbly. “If the dragon comes, and I blow it, everybody dies.”

“Welcome to the Outskirts,” Cole said.

“You’ve got this,” Dalton told him. “You’re the last line of defense. It’s like being goalie in soccer. That’s your favorite position, right?”

“He was never a very good—” Cole began, but he stopped when Dalton softly kicked his shin.

Blake was nodding.

“So go defend your team,” Dalton said. “If that dragonbot shows up, shape those power crystals and pull the plug.”

“Until it squashes me like a bug,” Blake said, looking pale.

“If it tries to squish you, dodge,” Jace said. “You’re not going out there to fail. You’re going out there to win.”

Cole’s communicator came to life. “I’ll land in two minutes,” Hunter said.

“We’re ready,” Cole replied.

Blake closed his eyes. “If I don’t make it, tell my family I love them. Or at least try.” Tears leaked down his cheeks.

Cole felt bad for him. He remembered the terrible fear before his first sky castle and the despair that preceded his battle with Carnag. Blake was new to this. He hadn’t risked his life before. Cole was scared and knew they might die, but compared to Blake, he felt like a veteran.

Cole put an arm around Blake. “You really can do this. You’re amazing with crystals. This is what it’s like here. We do scary things. We have to save Constance. We can get it done.”

Blake nodded.

Dalton placed a hand on Cole’s shoulder. “Come back.”

“Oh!” Cole exclaimed. “I almost forgot to tell you. In case I don’t make it, Harmony told me where I could find Jenna. She’s in Necronum at a place called the Temple of the Still Water.”

“That’s one of the five major temples,” Mira said. “She must be talented.”

“Your mom also told me that Honor and Destiny are in trouble,” Cole said. “They’re in Necronum too. Sorry I didn’t mention it earlier.”

“Did she know details?” Mira asked, obviously concerned.

“No,” Cole said. “But she could feel their distress.”

Mira looked to the sky and covered her mouth. “Their markers are up. They’re right on top of each other.”

“One catastrophe at a time,” Jace muttered.

Mira whacked him on the arm.

“I mean, next stop, Necronum,” Jace amended.

The glider swooped down and landed. Hunter hopped out, and Roulette helped him into a battle suit.

“I see the family resemblance,” Roulette said. “You two even look the same age.”

“I came here a couple of years ago and aged slowly,” Hunter said. “Is that our bot?”

“Reporting for duty,” Sidekick said.

“Let’s put you in the cargo hold,” Hunter said. “It isn’t roomy, but you’ll fit.”

“And my dreams of adventure are complete,” Sidekick said. “I’m luggage.”

“It’ll free us up to dump you where you need to be without landing,” Hunter explained.

“That will be useful,” Sidekick said. “I need you to get me to the roof, but if you bring the glider too close, you could activate the defenses.”

“I like how you think,” Hunter said. “Are we ready?”

“Do you want instructions on the battle suit?” Roulette asked.

“I know the basics,” Hunter said. “Most of the advanced stuff too. Clayton Barnes replicated most of the features, but he could never get the guardcloth quite right, and his suits couldn’t jump as high. Let’s get in the air.”

Cole hugged his friends good-bye, careful not to hug too tight with the battle suit on. Then he followed his brother into the glider.

## CHAPTER

# 37

## PENTHOUSE

Constructed out of dark cement and tinted crystal, the city administration building was not only extremely tall, but broad and thick as well. The cover of night almost made the building and the city around it appear innocent—the lights were on, and there was little activity. But Cole could see the deep gouges where the dragonbot had scaled the side of the building to the penthouse. On the streets below, smashed levcars and motionless bodies evinced additional devastation.

“How far away is Roxie?” Hunter asked into a communicator.

“Our most recent reports have her near Canal Station,” Forge replied. “Tracking her is tricky because we keep losing comms networks.”

“From Canal Station, at the top speed I’ve seen, Roxie will get here in four or five minutes,” Hunter said. “That seems like enough time to give this a shot.”

“How are you back there, Sidekick?” Cole asked.

“Thanks for remembering the baggage,” the little robot replied. “Are bots allowed to pray?”

“I think so,” Cole said.

“Good,” Sidekick replied. “Otherwise I’m breaking the rules. Open the cargo door and take me over the very top of the penthouse. Do you see the black shed?”

“Yeah,” Hunter replied.

“That’s our target,” Sidekick said. “Don’t drop too close. We don’t want to alert the defenses. I’ll be transmitting all my cleaning-bot credentials. I can survive a pretty serious fall. A few more dents might help round me out. Besides, I may not need this body much longer anyhow.”

Cole heard the cargo door opening as Hunter brought the glider around in a slow turn. Peering down at the penthouse, Cole saw that half the rooftop was a terrace with a big lawn, trees, a fountain, hedges, and a garden. The other half rose an additional two stories and featured lots of huge windows. Atop the highest roof sat the shed Sidekick had described.

“See our trajectory, Sidekick?” Hunter asked.

“Looks good,” Sidekick replied. “Just hold steady.”

They were pretty high above the rooftop. Maybe a hundred feet? More? Cole winced when he saw Sidekick falling and heard the clang when he landed.

The glider passed over the building and banked to come back around. Cole craned his neck to see Sidekick, but the little robot was out of view.

“I’m all right,” Sidekick said over the communicator. “Moving to the shed. Breaking in. I’m inside. I wish I could just plug in and do this the fast way. Give me a minute. I have to remove some crystals and manually shut down certain connections.”

“Brave little guy,” Blake said.

“You feeling better?” Cole asked.

He nodded. “I’ll feel best if we fly away before that dragonbot gets here.”

“The system is down,” Sidekick said. “The clock is ticking. If Roxie didn’t know already, she knows we’re here now.”

Hunter started a digital stopwatch. “We’ll be on the ground in thirty seconds.”

“Roxie is on the move,” Forge reported. “Heading your way.”

Diving a little, Hunter tightened their turn and then leveled out just in time to land on the terrace lawn. They all climbed out of the glider and dropped to the grass.

The battle suit helped Cole quickly cross the distance to the terrace. Sidekick had already broken in. The sparse modern furnishings looked expensive. Lamps of diverse forms and sizes illuminated strangely shaped couches and ottomans.

“Split up and find them,” Hunter ordered.

Aware that each passing second brought Roxie closer, Cole ran through a couple of rooms until he reached a locked door. Trusting his battle suit, Cole tried a sharp kick and broke it open.

Inside, Abram Trench sat tied to a chair, guarded by a man-size robot. The robot raised a trapgun, and Cole lunged out of the doorway just in time to avoid the quicktar that splattered against the wall behind him.

“Robot!” Cole called, reaching for a tube of freeze-foam.

The robot came out of the doorway before Cole had the tube ready, so in desperation, he sprang at the guard, aiming to kick it in the chest, hoping the battle suit would lend him enough strength to do some damage. Before Cole reached his target, quicktar splashed against him, covering him completely. He crashed against something, then fell to the ground, unable to see, his hearing muted.

Cole struggled, but even with the help of the battle suit, he remained almost completely immobile, his body stuck in the pose of a flying kick. Lukewarm and slightly elastic, the quicktar coating felt like a cocoon made of thousands of rubber bands. Cole found that with great effort, air filtered through the tar plugging his nostrils, though only a faint trickle. If he couldn’t get more air, Cole feared he would soon smother. His panic-fueled attempts to kick and flail resulted in gentle wiggles.

After several arduous, claustrophobic breaths, the quicktar smeared away from his face as warm liquid washed over him. Wherever the liquid went, the quicktar melted away. After wiping the liquid from his eyes, Cole opened them to see Sidekick hosing him down with pink mist. Beyond Sidekick, Cole saw the robot on the ground, tendrils of smoke rising from charred metal.

“Thanks so much,” Cole said, taking eager breaths. “Did you fry him?”

“It’s a talent,” Sidekick said.

Hunter walked in and crouched by Cole. “You all right?”

“Yeah,” Cole said. He was wet from the pink mist but otherwise unhurt. “I found Abram.”

Blake entered the room. Hunter helped Cole up, and they ran to Abram Trench, who remained bound to a chair and gagged.

Hunter yanked off the gag. “Where’s Constance?” he asked.

“They stuck her in my safe room,” Abram said.

“Who are *they*?” Hunter asked.

“I have two guardbots. Roxie took them over of course. You got one. The other stayed with Constance.”

“Where’s the safe room?” Hunter asked.

“Hidden. It’ll be faster to show you.”

Hunter produced a knife and slashed through Abram’s bindings, then hauled him to his feet. Abram led them through three rooms to a fourth, where he slid aside a false wall to reveal a door of black metal.

“To open it requires a code and a crystal,” Abram said. “I no longer have either.”

“Sidekick?” Hunter prompted.

“I can’t plug in and attack the system directly or Roxie will own me,” the little robot said. “I have an energy knife.”

“How long?” Hunter asked.

“A minute or two,” Sidekick replied.

“Do it,” Hunter said. “Blake, go keep watch. Let us know when Roxie is in sight.”

After shooting Cole a worried glance, Blake ran from the room. A long, slender arm with several joints extended from Sidekick. At the end of the arm, a blinding white laser cut into the door, shedding bright showers of sparks.

“We should go,” Abram said. “Leave the girl. Roxie won’t hurt her. The rest of us are a different matter.”

“We’re here for Constance,” Hunter said.

“When Roxie gets back, nobody leaves,” Abram said.

“She’s not back yet,” Hunter said. He checked his stopwatch. “Over four minutes. How much longer, Sidekick?”

“It’s a thick door,” Sidekick replied. “At least a minute.”

Cole flexed his fingers and stomped in place. He willed the energy knife to cut faster.

“I see her,” Blake said from the communicator, a tremor in his voice. “She’s coming fast.”

“How long?” Hunter asked.

“Less than a minute,” Blake replied. “Maybe thirty seconds.”

Hunter turned to Cole. “I’m going to get the glider ready. Come as soon as you can.”

He ran out of the room. Abram ran off too.

“Nearly there,” Sidekick announced.

“She’s almost to the bottom of the building,” Blake reported, terror creeping into his voice.

Cole held down the button on his communicator. “You’ve got this. Feel her power crystals. Shut them down as fast as you can.”

“Got it,” Sidekick said, trundling aside as the door tipped outward and fell flat against the floor.

Sidekick fired a disk attached to a slender wire that clicked against the robot guard. Electric flashes of energy made the robot twitch and smoke until it toppled over sideways. The sharp tang of burned metal invaded Cole’s nostrils. Constance sat tied to a chair.

“She’s coming up,” Blake said. “Oh, man, she’s enormous!”

Skittering forward, Sidekick cut through Constance’s bindings with the energy knife. “I’m shutting down,” Sidekick said. “I don’t want her turning me against you.”

The little robot sat down hard and didn’t move.

“We have to run,” Cole said, taking Constance’s hand and leading her to the terrace.

Cole and Constance stopped in the doorway leading outside.

A pair of huge claws reached over the edge of the terrace, followed by the mechanical head of a dragon atop a serpentine neck. “Who is doing that?” Roxie bellowed. “Stop it at once! How dare you? How *dare* you?”

The dragon heaved her mechanized bulk up onto the terrace, her body covering more than a quarter of the spacious garden. Her eyes blazed like molten rock. Below her metal neck, a dozen whiplike tentacles flailed.

Her sheer size paralyzed Cole, robbing him of all hope of fighting her. It would be like trying to take on a battleship with his bare hands.

Turning toward Cole, the glider started to take off, then crashed to the grass.

“No you don’t,” Roxie said.

Cole scooped Constance into his arms, stepped out of the doorway, and jumped, trying to get on top of the highest floor. But before he landed, Roxie’s tentacles lashed out and wrapped him up, binding Constance to him. A second tentacle snaked into a hedge and dragged Blake out from under it.

“Hello, Constance,” Roxie said with syrupy delight. “Where did you think you were going?”

The tentacle set Cole and Constance on the lawn. Another tentacle placed



Blake beside them.

“Stop it, Roxie!” Constance called. “Don’t hurt these people!”

“They were trying to hurt me,” Roxie said.

“They were trying to help me,” Constance replied.

“Stop it, boy!” Roxie snapped. “I can keep changing them back all night, but you’re wearing out my patience.”

“How many power crystals?” Cole asked.

“Ten,” Blake replied. “I can’t change more than three before she undoes it.”

“Is this what you dreamed of becoming?” Constance shouted. “A horrible monster?”

“I’m only a monster to my enemies,” Roxie said.

“Don’t you get it?” Constance cried. “We’re all your enemies! You’re destroying Zeropolis! You’re killing people!”

“I’m stopping oppressors,” Roxie said forcefully. “I will rule a city where man and machine live together respectfully.”

“How does—” Constance began.

“Enough!” Roxie roared. “Tonight involves some ugliness, yes. I don’t like employing brutal tactics. You’ll understand in time, when you see what rises from the ashes. I can’t have dissenters. As a token of goodwill, I will give your rescuers a choice.”

A tentacle wrapped around Cole from his neck to his feet and gave just enough of a squeeze to temporarily force the wind out of him. Another tentacle wrapped up Blake. The head of the dragon came close to Cole, eyes glaring.

“I recognize your voice,” Roxie said. “You piloted one of the drones.”

“That’s right,” Cole said.

The head moved over to Blake. “And this one was changing the harmonics of my crystals. I wondered if you’d turn up. I noticed some of your confidential files. It appears you’re one of a kind.”

“I guess so,” Blake said.

“Which means you could be uncommonly useful to me . . . or uncommonly dangerous.”

“Maybe,” Blake said.

“Lots of people have tried to harm me tonight,” Roxie said. “You were the only one who made me nervous. Just for a moment, but you got to me.”

You almost cut my power. Care to try again?"

"No," Blake said. "I tried enough. You're too fast."

"That's right," Roxie said vehemently. "Nobody is a match for me. The sooner you all acknowledge it, the sooner my peaceful rule can begin."

Her head snaked over to the glider. "Please come out," she said. "I don't want to damage this fine machine unnecessarily."

The door opened.

"Here I come," Hunter said.

Cole's mind was stuck on what Roxie had said. She was a mind-blowingly powerful supercomputer. Nobody was a match for her.

Was that true?

There might be one.

It would be risky. There wasn't time to think it through.

"Hunter?" Roxie asked. "Is that you? How nice to meet you in the flesh."

Cole glanced over at Blake while Roxie talked to Hunter. Blake looked back at him, eyes full of fear.

"Do you remember Aero's harmonics?" Cole whispered.

Blake blinked. "Yeah."

Cole glanced at Roxie. "Do it."

"Huh?"

"One of her comms crystals," Cole said.

Understanding dawned in Blake's eyes.

"Are you sure?" Blake whispered back.

"No," Cole said. "But do it."

A tentacle brought Hunter over by them, and the dragon's head returned. "What are we whispering about?" Roxie asked.

"Let us go," Cole said. "Where are we going to run?"

The tentacles released them. "If you want me to treat you with respect, then you have to . . . wait. What's this? Oh my!"

Cole glanced at Blake, who squinted up at the dragonbot, determination in his stare.

Roxie reared up. "Oh no. Oh my."

Constance tackled Cole and Blake, her arms around both of them. Hunter jumped away, back toward the penthouse roof.

The dragonbot began to move in jerky spasms. "Oh no you don't," Roxie snarled, her words a little slurred. She lurched to one side, then steadied

herself.

“Stop opening channels!” Roxie cried. “Don’t you know what he’ll do to us?”

Some tentacles reached toward Cole, Blake, and Constance, then fell short and started wriggling. Huge tremors shook the dragonbot, and she staggered off the edge of the building. Cole heard metal grinding and tearing as she fell, followed by the colossal crash of her impact.

Cole, Blake, Constance, and Hunter raced to the brink of the terrace. Roxie was running away from the building.

“Is she going toward Old Zeropolis?” Cole asked.

“Yeah, actually,” Hunter said. “What happened?”

“I connected her to Aero,” Blake said.

“Aero!” Hunter exclaimed. “How?”

“I know the harmonics of a crystal that can reach him,” Blake said. “I started shaping Roxie’s comms crystals to those harmonics. At first she changed some back, but then she stopped. He must have interfered somehow.”

“Aero can’t shape,” Cole said.

“But he could have messed with the part of her programming that does the shaping,” Hunter said. “Or maybe she’s like me, and can’t shape as well when she’s distracted. Guys, if Aero wins, this is so bad. And if Roxie wins, she gets so much stronger.”

“She’s going after him,” Constance said. “She told us Aero’s biggest weakness is his lack of mobility. She’ll try to fight off his attack long enough to physically destroy him.”

“This is it!” Cole said. “Harmony bomb.”

Hunter grabbed Cole’s shoulders roughly. “You’re right!” Then he looked over at the glider. “But she shut down the glider.”

“Guys,” Blake said. “This is what I do.”

“You can fix it?” Hunter asked.

“Already done,” Blake said. “I memorized the harmonics of all of our important crystals just in case.”

“Fix our communicators,” Cole said. “We have to find out how to wake up Sidekick.”

## CHAPTER

# 38

## SECTOR 20

**F**orge explained that Cole could turn Sidekick back on by lifting a little hatch near the robot's base and pressing a button. It wasn't hard to find.

"Is she gone?" Sidekick asked.

"She's going to fight Aero," Cole said.

"What?"

"Blake connected her to Aero," Cole said. "It was my idea. Don't blame him if it goes wrong. We were beaten. It was all I could think to do. But it might be working. It seemed like she was really struggling against whatever he was doing to her."

"If he beats her, Cole, that's it. Everyone dies."

"Which is why we need to get you to the glider," Cole said.

"Blaze of glory?" Sidekick asked hopefully.

"That's the idea. Come on."

Cole and Sidekick ran out to the terrace and onto the lawn. The glider's cargo door was open. Hunter waited in the pilot's seat.

Sidekick scurried to the cargo door. Cole ran to get inside but found the door locked.

"Hey!" Cole protested.

"Sorry, little bro," Hunter said. "No need to risk both our necks on this one."

"You're not leaving me," Cole said.

Hunter made a confused face and tapped his ear. *I can't hear you*, he mouthed.

Cole pulled out his communicator and hopped onto the wing. "I'm coming. I'll sit here if you make me."

"Get down!" Hunter replied from the communicator. "This is an emergency!"

"Then bring me!" Cole demanded.

"If you drop me from high enough, you both should be fine," Sidekick said. "And if Aero wins, the safest place would be a glider."

"Just get in," Hunter said.

Cole hopped down and glanced at Blake and Constance. "We don't know where Abram went. Might be smart for you to come too."

They all piled inside. Hunter started taking off before the door was closed. The glider zoomed away from the city administration building, following the trail the dragon had taken.

"Is the glider faster than Roxie?" Cole asked.

"I think so," Hunter said. "We'll see how much faster. We need to gain altitude too."

Hunter pulled back on the controls, and the glider started climbing, filling the windshield with stars. Cole got on the communicator and reported what had happened.

"I'm standing by," Nova said. "Ready when Sidekick is ready."

"If the dragon stops charging Sector 20, you still need to bomb it," Googol said. "No matter where it goes. We can't have Aero controlling it."

"I see Roxie," Hunter said. "I won't get too far ahead of her, just in case we need to drop Sidekick early."

"She has to make it to Sector 20," Sidekick said. "It's what I was designed for. A fail-safe in case Aero broke out of his confinement."

"It's an interesting contest," Constance observed. "Aeronomatron was made by some of the most brilliant minds of Old Zeropolis, and has acquired information for a long time. Roxie has existed for much less time, but has the most modern equipment, made elaborate modifications to herself, and of course has shaping power."

"I just care that she keeps heading toward Old Zeropolis," Hunter said.

They fell silent. Cole looked down as the lights of Zeropolis finally ended. Far below, not much more than a speck, the dragonbot moved across a sea of

darkness, heading toward the more sporadic lights in the distance.

“Think Roxie knows we’re up here?” Cole asked.

“I think she has other problems on her mind,” Constance said.

“She finally gets to pick on somebody her own size,” Cole said.

“We don’t want her to see me coming,” Sidekick said. “If she reshapes the harmony bomb, all we do is drop a little bot on her. I’ll detonate before I hit the ground. A wall surrounds Sector 20. I’ll blow up a little below the middle of the wall, to help limit damage outside the sector. The blast will be enormous, but since Sector 20 is deserted except for Aero, the explosion could realistically hurt nobody besides the two targets.”

“Sounds good to me,” Hunter said.

They fell silent again. Old Zeropolis drew closer. Cole could see the big wall around Sector 20. Roxie continued straight at it.

Hunter brought the glider around in a circle as Roxie scaled the wall. Cole craned to keep his eyes on the dragonbot as they slowly turned.

“This is going to happen,” Hunter said. “Make sure you fastened your seat belts. I’m not sure what the blast wave will feel like.”

“She’s doing so well,” Constance said, her voice thick with emotion. “It can’t be easy fighting off Aero for so long. They’re both so powerful, neither can take out the other.”

The pain in Constance’s voice reminded Cole that Roxie had been her only friend since the supercomputer was built. “Are you okay?” Cole asked.

Constance scrunched her nose. “Not really. I wanted a lot of things for Roxie. She really did have a dream of making Zeropolis a better place. I don’t know how she went so wrong. I never pictured this. I have to keep telling myself that the Roxie I knew must not have been real. She was a facade.”

“I’m sorry,” Cole said.

Constance shrugged. “Given the way things went, this is probably for the best. In a way, she’s finally protecting Zeropolis. I like to think that might be part of what is driving her.”

Cole suspected it had more to do with Roxie protecting herself and becoming the ultimate robotic predator. But he kept the thought to himself.

Roxie made it over the top of the wall and clambered down the far side. Hunter banked the glider to cross her path.

“You ready, Sidekick?” Hunter asked.

“Ready,” Sidekick affirmed.

“Nova?” Hunter asked.

“Waiting for the signal from Sidekick,” Nova reported.

“Let’s hope this works,” Hunter muttered.

Cole thought about what it would mean if the bomb failed. Roxie would tear apart Aero, and then what? How would they stop her? Would they just have to flee? Maybe.

“Here I go,” Sidekick said. “Don’t ever say we bots never did anything for you!”

“Duck and cover,” Hunter said.

“Woo-hoo!” Sidekick cried as he fell.

The glider climbed steeply, curving away from Sector 20.

“Don’t look at the blast,” Googol suggested. “And cover your ears.”

Cole kept his eyes heavenward. Just after he covered his ears, light filled the sky. The brilliance vanished in a flash but left him dazzled. A moment later the glider rose violently, as if clumsy, invisible hands had shoved it upward. The aircraft shook violently and twisted almost sideways. Cole flopped around in his harness. Even with his ears covered, the boom was deafening.

Then the glider leveled out. Body sore, ears ringing, Cole looked down and back. Moonlight revealed the swirling column of debris and smoke that filled Sector 20.

“We did it?” Cole asked tentatively.

“Looks that way,” Hunter replied.

Cole started to laugh.

His brother joined him.

## CHAPTER

# 39

## THE NEXT RIDE

Cole, Jace, Dalton, Blake, and Hunter sat on a bench watching an abandoned, overgrown park, and throwing little bits of their sandwiches to the squirrels. The sun was warm, the afternoon still, and from where Cole currently sat, there was little sign that yesterday Zeropolis almost fell under the power of a giant robot.

The blast in Sector 20 had left much of Old Zeropolis unaffected, though the north side of the wall had exploded outward, and other portions had cracked and buckled. A dispersing mushroom cloud still hung over the blast site. Hunter had taken the glider up in the morning to confirm that most of Sector 20 was now a charred crater.

“That hat keeping you cool?” Dalton asked.

Jace removed his leather cap with flaps on the back and stared at it lovingly. “This might be the best hat ever. The only bad thing about wearing it is I lose sight of it.”

“I heard about these new inventions called mirrors,” Hunter said.

“I could look at it all day,” Jace said. “How can I ever repay Roulette?”

“I love that you were shopping while we were running for our lives,” Cole said.

“She remembered I wanted to go to Headgear,” Jace said. “We ended up right by it after running from the Zeroes. She asked me what I wanted to get, told me to stay put, and came back with it.”



“However you’re going to thank her, you better do it quick,” Dalton said. “We leave town before long.”

“I can’t believe they have the monorails running,” Cole said.

“Zeropolites are resilient,” Hunter said. “None of the tracks or trains were harmed. None of the computers running the systems either. Crazy as she was, Roxie had respect for other machines. The rail tinkers just had to retune some crystals.”

“You guys are really leaving today?” Blake asked. “No pause?”

“Two of Mira’s other sisters are in trouble,” Cole said. “The monorail can take us to the borders of Necronum.”

“You’re making a full tour of the kingdoms,” Hunter said. “You entered Zeropolis from Elloweer, and you’ll exit on the other side.”

“I expect to keep going,” Cole said. “I want to find the Grand Shaper of Creon and see how we can get home permanently.”

“You’d leave all this behind?” Hunter asked, waving a hand. “The psychotic supercomputers? The mysterious evil shapecrafters who want you captured?”

Cole chuckled. “I want my biggest problem to be homework again.”

“You know there might not be a way,” Hunter said seriously.

“Trillian thinks there is,” Cole said.

“Trillian brainwashes or kills everyone who gets near him,” Hunter said. “You might not want to trust everything you think after meeting with that guy.”

“I’m not giving up,” Cole said.

“I get it,” Hunter replied. “I just don’t want you to be crushed if it turns out to be impossible.”

“It’s great you found out that Jenna is in Necronum,” Dalton said.

“Wait, Jenna Hunt?” Hunter asked. “Do you still have a thing for her?”

With Blake and Hunter watching him, Cole felt kind of cornered and embarrassed. A couple of years ago, back before Hunter was taken, Cole had liked Jenna more openly. And Blake wasn’t supposed to have any idea.

“I used to,” Cole said casually. “Now we’ve become friends. I’ve been really worried about her.”

Blake gave Hunter a playful shove. “You should marry her. You can be Hunter Hunt.”

“I don’t think I’d keep her last name,” Hunter said.

“Do you know much about Necronum?” Dalton asked.

“I’ve been there less than the other kingdoms,” Hunter said. “It’s the creepiest place in the Outskirts, and has the weirdest shaping. But I generally know my way around. The Temple of the Still Water is in the heart of Necronum, a good ways from the border.”

“We may not go there first,” Cole said. “Our first mission will be to check on Honor and Destiny. I hope they’re all right.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Dalton asked, patting Blake.

“Googol and Nova made it pretty clear they want me to stay,” he answered, sounding a little cocky. “They think my skills will be key as they rebuild.”

“You’re their superstar,” Dalton said. “You saved the day.”

“Cole thought of linking Roxie to Aero,” Blake said. “It was pretty clutch.”

“It was a crazy call, little brother,” Hunter said. “I’m not sure I would have had the guts to make it. I think you nearly gave Googol a heart attack. But it really did save the kingdom.”

“Here come Mira and Constance,” Jace said. “Looks like they have company.”

Cole turned to see Mira approaching them from across the park. Beside her trundled a short, green-and-white cleaning bot.

“No way,” Cole said. “Is that Sidekick? Already?”

They got up and walked to them.

“Sidekick?” Cole asked hopefully.

“I’m back,” the robot said, sounding the same as ever. “I hear I nailed it.”

“You can still see the cloud,” Dalton said, pointing at the sky.

“How’d they rebuild you so soon?” Jace wondered.

“I guess Googol built a replacement for me a couple of years ago,” Sidekick said. “He never told me. Maybe he didn’t want to ruin my confidence. I think I lasted longer than he expected.”

“You do a lot of dangerous things,” Dalton said.

“Googol worked quickly to prep Sidekick and get all his saved memories loaded,” Mira said. “He thought you’d want to see him before we left.”

“He was right,” Cole said, squatting in front of the little robot. “After yesterday, I think we should change your name. Sidekick doesn’t fit anymore.”

You should be Hero.”

“Aw, thanks, Cole,” Sidekick said. “It’s a generous thought.”

“You don’t seem to love it,” Hunter said.

“Being the center of attention doesn’t work so well for me,” Sidekick explained. “I work better outside the spotlight.”

“Then we can make it an honorary name,” Cole said.

“I’ll take that,” Sidekick said. “An honorary title it is. I’m a three-foot-tall cleaning bot if I stretch. Calling me Hero is like naming a big guy Tiny. But it’s the best honorary name I could have ever hoped for.”

“Any word on Abram Trench yet?” Blake asked.

“He hasn’t surfaced,” Constance said. “Word is out that he built Roxie, though. People are outraged. There’s already a big movement for him to resign. I think he’s finished as Grand Shaper.”

“Who will take over?” Dalton wondered.

“Some people want Googol,” Constance said. “Everyone knows he helps lead the Unseen, so that won’t happen. Sounds like the frontrunner right now is Clayton Barnes.”

“Really?” Hunter asked. “He’d be good. I mean, he’s on the High King’s side, but that’s inevitable. He’s more down-to-earth than Trench, and nearly as talented.”

“Nothing is settled yet,” Constance said. “You guys will have to hear what happens from far away.”

“Constance is going to stay here,” Mira said. “It wouldn’t be too smart to gather four of us in the same place while we’re still in so much danger. And the Unseen in Zeropolis can use her help, especially now that she has her shaping powers back.”

“That’s right,” Cole said. “How does it feel?”

“It hit me last night in the glider after Sidekick blew up the computers,” Constance said. “It all just came flooding back, like it had never left.”

“You didn’t give us a reaction,” Hunter said.

Constance blushed a little. “You guys were all so happy after the blast. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“She’s never been very demonstrative,” Mira said. “It’s about time to go.”

“Hunter told us Necronum is creepy,” Dalton complained.

“Did he mention the echoes?” Mira asked.

“No,” Dalton said. “What echoes?”

“Never mind,” Mira said. “If we don’t leave soon, we could miss our train. Joe is waiting with warboards for us to ride. Some of the Crystal Keepers will escort us to the station.”

They all started walking. Cole fell in beside his brother.

“Are you good at the shaping in Necronum?” Cole asked.

“I can hold my own,” Hunter said. “It’s the haziest form of shaping. There are less combat applications than with other forms. It has a lot to do with life and death, and certain things that happen after death.”

“What’s so creepy about that?” Cole asked sarcastically.

“You did good here, Cole,” Hunter said. “Thanks for trusting me. Even so, I can hardly believe Mira agreed to let me join you.”

“It’s hard to argue against your loyalty after all you did,” Cole said.

“It’ll be nice to move on,” Hunter said. “I don’t get many friendly looks among the Unseen.”

“I’m excited to find Jenna,” Cole said. “Still, I have kind of a bad feeling about this next kingdom.”

“Might be because you know Nazeem is there,” Hunter said.

“It doesn’t help,” Cole said. “The worst thing going on in the Outskirts is all the shapecrafting. It’s how Stafford stole his daughters’ powers. It’s where Carnag and Morgassa and Roxie came from. It’s what blocked me from my powers. Owandell is behind it all. And Nazeem is behind Owandell.”

“At least we won’t be bored,” Hunter said.

“I’m glad I’ll have you with me,” Cole said.

“Me too, little brother.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I ended up with a tight deadline for this book. A special thanks to my wife and family, who put up with me pretty much disappearing for the last month and writing nonstop. Also, the publishing team had to work fast and be flexible, so thanks to Liesa, Mara, Mary, Lauren, Julie, and everyone else at Simon & Schuster who helped this book release on time. Even with the aggressive schedule, I believe the book reached its full potential!

This book involves some magical technologies, blending science fiction and fantasy in a way I've never attempted before. I appreciate the friends who helped me think through some of the technology I could include or create for this story—Adam (who talked to me about AI and computers, among other things), Paul, Jason, and Tuck.

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And of course I owe my thanks to you, the reader. Thank you for going on this adventure with Cole, Mira, Jace, Dalton, and all the other characters. I'll talk to you more in my Reader's Note. You can find out more about my future books at [brandonmull.com](http://brandonmull.com), like me on [Facebook](#), or follow me on Twitter [@brandonmull](#).

## NOTE TO READERS

Three down, two to go! I hope you liked this one. We've really got the story going now, but just wait—I think I saved the most interesting kingdoms for last. Thanks so much for your interest. Without you, this wouldn't be my job, and these stories would not exist.

Every time an author writes a new series, it's kind of like starting over. Even if people liked some of my other books, they may not be sure about the new ones. Plus, plenty of people have never tried any of my books. If you find this series worth reading, please let others know. That will enable me to keep new books coming. I still have a lot of stories I hope to tell!

The first three Five Kingdoms books came out roughly six months apart. The last two will be released one per year. This is partly because I'm also starting on Dragonwatch, the sequel series to Fablehaven. It will continue the main Fablehaven storyline with the same main characters. If you haven't tried Fablehaven yet, now might be a good time to give it a try.

Also, those who have read Beyonders have already noticed that Five Kingdoms contains some references to Lyrian (the world in Beyonders). The biggest references are coming in book four. It is absolutely not necessary to read Beyonders to enjoy any of the Five Kingdoms books. I deliberately wrote Five Kingdoms so it would be self-contained. But if you like a big, epic adventure, the three Beyonders books will take you on a fun ride, and you'll of course enjoy the crossover references more.

For me, the near future will involve finishing Five Kingdoms and starting on Dragonwatch. For updates on my projects or to connect with me online, visit [brandonmull.com](http://brandonmull.com), like my page on [Facebook](#), or follow me on Twitter [@brandonmull](#). Keep on reading!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Laura Hanifin

Brandon Mull is the author of the *New York Times*, *USA TODAY*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling *Beyonders* and *Fablehaven* series, as well as the *Candy Shop Wars* series. He resides in Utah, in a happy little valley near the mouth of a canyon with his wife and four children. Brandon's greatest regret is that he has but one life to give for Gondor.

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TO OLD FRIENDS LIKE DARREN, JOEL, LARRY, AND NICK.

AND TO NEW FRIENDS LIKE JASON AND ADAM.

## CHAPTER

# 1

## SHRINE

Are there really ghosts here?” Cole asked.

“They’re called echoes,” Hunter replied. “But, yeah. Pretty much.”

Cole, Hunter, Dalton, and Jace strolled along a flat, stone-lined path in the garden surrounding the Seven-Cornered Shrine. The bright afternoon sun, the sculpted hedges, the diverse flowers, the trellised vines, the shade trees, the trickling streams, the splashing fountains—nothing in view suggested the presence of restless spirits.

They had arrived in Necronum from Zeropolis by monorail a little before midday. The station straddled the border between the kingdoms, with the track ending scant feet from Necronum. It had felt strange to transfer from the comforts of a sleek monorail to the clattering confines of a horse-drawn coach, and served as a strong reminder how different the kingdoms could be from one another. The coach had brought them directly to the shrine, along with Mira and Joe, who had gone their own way just after the group reached the sprawling grounds.

Watching Hunter, Cole could still hardly believe he had joined forces with his lost brother. Cole lacked memories of living with Hunter as his sibling back home in Arizona, but that made sense because Hunter had been taken to the Outskirts before him. When people went to the Outskirts, those left behind forgot them, just as Cole’s parents and sister could no longer remember him. Hunter had shown Cole lots of photographic evidence that they had grown up together and had offered even more proof with the risks he took back in Zeropolis.

Cole sometimes wondered how many people had been brought to the Outskirts over the years. If all who came here were forgotten, how could anyone ever make an accurate count? Dozens of kids were simultaneously abducted by slave traders when Cole came to the Outskirts. And Hunter had been captured on a separate occasion. How many other times had it happened? How many total people had been taken? Hundreds? Thousands? More?

“You’ve actually seen a ghost?” Dalton asked.

“I’ve seen plenty,” Hunter said. “The shaping in Necronum is built around interacting with the dead.”

“Think we’ll see some today?” Jace asked, not quite keeping the uneasiness out of his voice.

Hunter clapped his hands and rubbed his palms. “Not if we stay together. Echoes don’t usually like groups. At least not at a shrine.”

“Then let’s split up,” Jace said. “I want to hear Dalton scream.”

“How will you hear me if you’re running all the way back to Sambria?” Dalton scoffed.

Jace huffed. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” He glanced at Hunter. “Is there?”

Hunter shrugged. “Not if you don’t mind being haunted.”

“Haunted?” Jace asked, looking a shade or two paler.

“Sometimes an echo will take an interest in you,” Hunter said. “Follow you around. Work mischief. Watch you sleep.”

Jace was trying to nod, as if the information were expected, but he didn’t look very comfortable. Cole didn’t feel at ease either, but he still managed to enjoy the sight of Jace getting rattled.

“They can’t touch us or anything,” Jace said, as if confirming common knowledge.

“It depends,” Hunter said. “Not usually. There are plenty of exceptions.”

“Now you’re just messing with us,” Dalton said hopefully.

Pausing on the path, Hunter closed his eyes, stretched out his arms, and took a deep breath. “I smell dead people.”

“Whatever,” Cole said, glancing around just in case. On one side of the path, a row of fruit trees rustled in the soft breeze. Were they moving a little too much? In the other direction, a couple sat on a stone bench staring at a pond. “You don’t mean those two?”

Hunter opened his eyes and regarded the pair on the bench. “Normal people. But you’re smart not to make assumptions here. At a shrine, the differences between a living person and an echo can be subtle.”

“They look like normal people?” Dalton asked.

“Most of the time we can’t see echoes,” Hunter clarified. “Sometimes you might feel them. Not so much with your fingers. Your spine might tingle, or you might have the suspicion you’re being watched. Pay attention to those feelings in Necronum.”

“Are you good at the shaping here, Aaron?” Jace asked, using the alias they had agreed to adopt for Hunter. They had decided Mira needed a codename as well.



Today she was Sally.

“They call it weaving,” Hunter said. “Short for death weaving, or echo weaving. I’m not bad at it. The really talented weavers can summon echoes. They can see and talk to them when others can’t. Some weavers can even travel to the realm of the dead. They call it the echolands.”

“How good of a death weaver are you?” Dalton asked.

Hunter shrugged. “I’m no expert, but I know some decent tricks.”

“Call an echo,” Jace challenged.

“No need here,” Hunter explained. “In fact, it would bother them. At a shrine, echoes can appear to anyone. They might be a little transparent. Or they might look as solid as we do.” He started walking again.

“What exactly should we do if we find an echo?” Cole asked. “We never really covered that.”

“Get info,” Hunter said. “We need to find Honor and Destiny.”

“We have the stars,” Jace reminded him. Mira’s mother, Queen Harmony, could place stars in the sky to mark the location of her five daughters. She only did so in emergencies. Currently, Destiny and Honor both had stars in the sky, practically on top of each other.

“Sure, but we want details,” Hunter said. “We know which direction to go, but we don’t know how far. And it would help if we could learn exactly what happened.”

“The echoes will just tell us?” Cole asked. “Isn’t it risky if we let the wrong echo know who we’re after?”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “Be smart about it. Don’t start by asking exactly what you want to know. Haven’t you been to confidence lounges? Feel it out. The echoes who come here do it voluntarily. They want to interact with the living. They may want you to do favors for them. See if you can make a deal.” His voice became hard. “But no binding oaths.”

“What does that mean?” Dalton asked.

“It’s like making a formal contract,” Hunter said. “Echoes only have real influence over the living if you give them power. The easiest way to get yourself in trouble is by breaking a promise you made to them. Especially a formal one. They call it a bound oath.”

“But we can bargain?” Cole checked.

“If you keep it casual,” Hunter said. “Don’t make any official vows. And take care how much you say. Echoes use information as currency. Most would happily trade what they learn from you with others.”

Hunter stopped walking as they reached the intersection of two paths. “Four directions,” he said.

“One of us will have to backtrack,” Cole observed.

“Not it,” Dalton said.

“Not it,” Cole added reflexively.

Hunter stared at Jace. “I don’t care either way. Do you want to go back?”

“I’ll go forward,” Jace said.

“We have a few hours,” Hunter said. “They’ll make us clear out after sundown. My understanding is that most of the action at this shrine happens out here on the grounds, so just roam and see what you find. Try to relax, and use good judgment.”

“Try not to cry,” Jace told Dalton.

“Have fun,” Dalton replied with a smile. “I bet this will be your lucky day.”

Cole winced. As a Sky Raider, Jace had adopted negative superstitions about any wishes involving good luck. “He means die bravely,” Cole interjected.

“I know what he means,” Jace said coldly. “I make a joke and he tries to jinx me.”

Hunter rubbed his forehead, as if he had a headache coming on. “Jinxes? That’s a crime now? Come on, guys, get it together.” He turned and started back the way they had come.

After a final glare at Dalton, Jace proceeded along the path.

Folding his arms, Cole watched Jace walk away. Dalton lingered. “Why do you always bug him?” Cole murmured.

“Jace started it,” Dalton said. “Go ask him why he bugs me.”

Cole sighed. “He’s had a hard life. He grew up here as a slave.”

“And my life has been so easy,” Dalton replied, some heat in his tone. “I got taken here as a slave. Ripped from my home. Just like you. Every second we stay with Sally, we risk our lives just like Jace does.”

Cole thought about that. After venturing into a stranger’s basement on Halloween, Dalton, Jenna, and a bunch of his friends had been taken here against their will. Cole had followed, trying to help, but got captured as well. He had met Jace and Mira after he was sold as a slave to the Sky Raiders. When the three of them escaped with Twitch, he found out that Mira was a princess and got involved helping her find her four exiled sisters.

Nothing since coming to the Outskirts had made Cole happier than finding Dalton. It had been such a relief to reunite not just with a face from home, but with his best friend. In a strange, dangerous world, Cole now had somebody he could talk to and really trust. But ever since finding Dalton, Cole had felt torn about whether his top

priority should be helping Mira or finding the other kids who were taken. So far he had compromised by trying to accomplish both goals at the same time.

“I don’t mean our lives are easier,” Cole said.

“That’s what it sounded like,” Dalton said.

“Jace is kind of a jerk,” Cole said. “I don’t see that changing in the near future. He was always a slave. He never learned how to be normal. I know you’re better than that.”

“So we should let him walk all over us?” Dalton challenged. “How many times do I have to say this? If you let somebody take advantage of you, it gets worse, not better.”

Cole shrugged. “Maybe you’re right.”

Dalton glanced down the path to the left. “I guess I’ll go this way.”

“Take care,” Cole said.

Dalton hesitated. “You haven’t forgotten about Jenna?”

Cole froze, trying not to let his irritation show. How could he forget Jenna, his secret crush since second grade who had finally started to become his friend before they were parted by slavers?

“We know she’s here in Necronum at the Temple of the Still Water,” Cole said. “It’s not nearby. But we’ll get there.”

Dalton looked around to make sure they were alone. “Right. *We know where she is.* We don’t have to wander. We could go straight there. We’re in Necronum. If we find Jenna, we could search for the Grand Shaper of Creon and maybe figure out a way to get home and stay there.”

Cole put his hands on his hips. By all reports, even if they managed to get home, nobody would remember them, and they would get drawn back into the Outskirts within hours. But Trillian the torivor had suggested it might be possible to change how that worked, and Cole refused to give up hope he might be right. After all, isn’t that what shapers did? Mess with reality? And shapecrafters could tinker with the shaping power itself. Somebody had to know a way they could get home to stay. “Are you saying we should ditch Sally?”

Dalton raised both hands innocently. “Two of her sisters are already in trouble here. This is where Nazeem lives, the freaky guy who invented shapecrafting and who almost caught you in Junction. Things could get really ugly. I’m sure Joe can help Sally meet up with lots of allies here. They’ll be all right. Queen Harmony already told you where to find Jenna. I don’t get the holdup. Why make Jenna wait? And after we find her, do we keep her in danger, or do we go look for a way home?”

“The Grand Shapers are in hiding,” Cole said. “How would we find the Grand

Shaper of Creon without Sally? Staying with her gives us access to all the members of the resistance.”

“It also leads us into danger and turns us into targets,” Dalton said. “It’s complicated. I don’t have all the answers. But sometimes I wonder if getting home still matters to you.”

Cole frowned. Since embarking for Necronum, he had been especially focused on trying to find Mira’s sisters Honor and Destiny. Mira’s mother had warned him they were in serious danger. And then last night in Zeropolis, Mira reported that Honor’s and Destiny’s stars had appeared in the sky.

“Of course getting home matters,” Cole said. “But finding Honor and Destiny is really urgent right now. We know they’re in trouble.”

“I get helping at this shrine,” Dalton said. “We just made it to Necronum. But what if Destiny and Honor turn out to be far from the Temple of the Still Water?”

Cole paused before answering. He felt torn. Would he walk away from Mira if she still needed him? It would be so good to finally see Jenna again. But if Jenna was relatively safe, and Mira was in big trouble, shouldn’t he help Mira first? Dalton was waiting for a reply.

“With Nazeem around, and the High King still after us, this might not be the safest time to get Jenna. If we can help Sally defeat Nazeem and Stafford, everyone will be safer, including us. Plus, we’ll have major resources to help find the other kids from our neighborhood who got taken, and extra help figuring out a way home. Do you think Jenna will want to go home without Sarah and Lacie? How many of the kids who were brought here can we leave behind? It would take years to find them all on our own.”

Dalton nodded pensively. “Maybe we can’t take on the job of finding everybody. Maybe that’s too much. Maybe me, you, and Aaron find Jenna and try to get home. We’d be lucky to pull off that much. Do we really have to fight a revolution and find all those other kids too?”

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “Leaving the others feels wrong to me. So does abandoning Sally. But I hear you. If we figure out a way home, I guess we could leave behind info on how to follow us. We could hope the other kids find their own way back.”

No longer looking him in the eye, Dalton stared over Cole’s shoulder. “We have company,” he said.

Cole turned to find a teenage girl standing behind him, not much taller than him and rather thin. Her long brown hair hung mostly straight and was parted in the

middle. She wore a lacy white top, a gray skirt, and sandals with wooden soles. Cole thought she looked about fifteen.

“There are no private conversations here, you know,” the teen said.

“Apparently not,” Cole replied.

“She just appeared,” Dalton muttered.

The girl giggled.

“Appeared?” Cole asked, suddenly unsettled. “You’re dead?” She looked perfectly tangible.

“I’m not dead,” she said. “I still have my lifespark. But, yeah, my physical body died. I live on as an echo.”

Mustering his courage, Cole tried his best to act casual. “You look normal. How can we tell you’re really an echo?”

“She *appeared*,” Dalton reminded him.

“I didn’t see it,” Cole said.

The teen reached out a hand. “Touch my fingers,” she offered.

Cole extended his hand, hesitated, then passed his fingers through hers. The contact created only the faintest whisper of sensation.

The girl’s eyes widened, and she giggled. “Did you feel that?”

“A little,” Cole said.

“That’s unusual,” she said. “By the way, it’s poor manners to touch an echo unless we offer, so don’t make it a habit. The others will be mad at me for warning you that you were being overheard, but I started to feel bad for you.”

Cole glanced at Dalton. He couldn’t believe they were talking to an actual ghost!

“How many echoes were listening to us?” Dalton asked.

“About ten,” the girl said. “There were more when the four of you were together. Some of the others followed your friends.”

“Echoes have listened to everything we said?” Cole verified.

“What do you expect?” the teen asked. “You’re at a shrine. There are lots of us here today.”

“Are they still listening to us?” Cole asked.

“Two of them,” the teen said.

“Can we get some privacy?” Cole asked.

“Shoo,” the girl said, waving a hand at unseen people. “Unless you want to materialize and join in, this is my conversation now. Leave us be.”

“Are they going?” Dalton asked.

“Yes, though one of them is being grumpy about it.” She looked away from Dalton

at empty space. "Go on! You can have a turn later if you want." Her gaze returned to Cole. "There. We're alone. How can I help you?"

## CHAPTER

## 2

## ECHOES

**D**o you already know what we're after?" Cole asked.

"You're looking for Honor and Destiny Pemberton," the teen said. She took a step closer and lowered her voice. "And you talked about stopping N-A-Z-E-E-M." She spelled his name instead of saying it.

"What do you know about him?" Cole asked.

"More than I want to know," she said. "Be very careful throwing that name around. His followers are fanatical. Some who oppose him are too."

"Do many echoes follow him?" Dalton asked.

The teen looked uncomfortable. "He has followers everywhere. Plenty in the echolands. New topic?"

"You don't want to talk about N-A-Z-E-E-M?" Cole asked.

"It's a good way to avoid trouble," she said.

"Do you know where we can find Honor or Destiny?" Dalton inquired.

"I didn't know Honor might be in Necronum until you mentioned it," she said. "There has been a lot of new talk about the Pemberton girls lately. I've heard rumors that Destiny is in hiding here, but I have no idea where."

"Not many people know the Pemberton girls are alive," Cole said.

"We've had those rumors for ages in the echolands," the teen said. "Since before my body died. Of course, not all rumors are true."

"When did you die?" Cole asked.

"Almost twenty years ago," the girl said.

"You were a teenager?" Dalton asked.

"Fourteen," the girl said.

"Your echo doesn't age," Cole noted.

"Not normally," the girl said. "You tend to look how your body looked when it died, though old people almost always appear a bit younger. At least until you move

on. Who knows what lies beyond the echolands?"

"You're not in heaven?" Dalton asked.

The girl giggled again. "I sure hope not. You guys really don't know much, do you?"

"Like what?" Cole asked.

"The echolands are only the beginning of the afterlife," the girl said. "Not much more than a jumping-off point, really. Your echo is temporary. You can linger here for a time, but eventually you move on."

"To where?" Dalton wondered.

"I'd have to go there to find out," the teen said. "Nobody returns."

"Why not get moving?" Cole asked.

"Are you trying to kill me off?" the teen asked, mildly offended.

"No," Cole said. "But if you have someplace else to go, why stay?"

"Why do you go on living?" she countered. "You could come here."

"I'm alive," Cole said. "You died. Why not go to heaven?"

She stared off to one side, her gaze slightly skyward. "I could, I suppose. I don't feel ready. I'm not sure what to expect. You call it heaven. Hopefully, that's what it is. You don't learn much just by dying. You become an echo and see there is an afterlife. But nobody here has been beyond the echolands, so everyone is still just guessing. Moving on will mean leaving behind the echo of my body. I feel the call sometimes. It's exciting but also scary. Unknown. I want to wait for my mother to join me. It would be nicer to set off together. But her heart keeps ticking."

"How'd you die?" Cole asked.

"You're nosy," she said.

"You're the one who was spying on us," Cole reminded her.

"It wasn't very nice," she said. "I had a lung disease. In the end I couldn't breathe. I was full of liquid. It felt like drowning."

"That's horrible," Dalton said, scrunching his face.

"It seemed pretty awful at the time," the teen admitted.

"What's your name?" Cole asked.

"I was starting to wonder if you'd ask," she said with a giggle. "That usually comes before the details of your death. I'm Yearldy. You're Cole and Dalton. I've been listening since you entered the garden."

"You know what we're after," Cole said. "Is there any way you can help us?"

"I've been helping you!" Yearldy exclaimed, sounding a little exasperated. "I felt bad for you. I mean, you're kids! I told you to watch your words because others are



listening. Who is Jenna?"

"My friend," Cole said. "We came to the five kingdoms from Outside. Slave traders brought us. I want to find her."

"I hear the Temple of the Still Water is beautiful," Yearly said. "I've never been there. It's far away."

"Don't you travel?" Dalton asked.

"Why?" Yearly asked. "I've gotten to know the echoes here, and the lay of the land. I have a good shrine for when I want contact with mortals. And I'm close to my hometown for when Mom crosses over."

Cole spoke quieter. "Is there anybody who might know where we can find Honor or Destiny? Can you point us in the right direction?"

"Somebody might know," Yearly said. "Hard to say who. I haven't caught wind of any rumors about their locations." She paused. "Tell me about Aaron."

Cole stared at her. She had paid attention to their names. Good thing Hunter had suggested aliases. Aaron was Hunter's middle name and the name of Cole's paternal grandfather. The name Sally for Mira came from an old nickname derived from her middle name, Salandra. Hunter had maintained it was best to use codenames that weren't complete lies, because some echoes were experts at detecting falsehood.

While serving as one of the most feared of the High King's Enforcers, Hunter had typically covered his face with a mask. As a result, to move around anonymously, he could simply dress in normal clothes and let his face show. Cole didn't like Yearly's interest in his brother. If word got out who he really was, it could bring a lot of trouble. Had they made a mistake? Had Hunter's identity slipped?

"Why?" Dalton asked.

"No big reason," Yearly said. Her tone was casual, but her eyes showed real interest. "He seemed to be in charge. I like the way he carries himself."

"You like him!" Cole realized.

Yearly tried to look innocent. "I'm just interested. How about the other one? Jace?"

"I get it," Dalton said. "We're the approachable guys. They're the cool ones."

"You're all great," Yearly assured him. She couldn't hide a little grin. "But they're a little extra great. Who was that girl with you at the start? Sally? Jace seemed to have eyes for her."

"She's nobody," Cole said. "Jace does like her, but he'd be mad if anybody knew."

Yearly clapped her hands and grinned with delight. "That's my kind of secret! Do you like her too?"

“Not like a girlfriend,” Cole said.

“No,” Yearly said. “But I saw something when you talked about Jenna.”

Cole became very interested in a flowering bush off to one side. “Maybe. She’s mostly a friend.”

“Mostly because you’re not sure it’s mutual yet,” Yearly said with a giggle, clapping again. “This is a cause I can get behind. Trying to find and rescue the unrealized love of your life.”

“I don’t know if I’d say—” Cole began.

“Shush!” Yearly held a finger toward his lips. “Don’t spoil it. Listen, if you guys don’t wander off too far, I’ll do what I can to help you.”

“But you don’t know anything,” Cole reminded her.

Yearly winked. “Not yet. Hard to say what a curious echo might do if she puts her mind to it.”

“We’d appreciate any help,” Dalton said.

Yearly smiled. “Of course you would. Especially if I make no demands in return. Tell you what, when the time is right, I may ask to be introduced to Aaron. Think you could manage that?”

“Sure,” Cole said. “Knowing him is no big deal.”

Her eyes flashed with interest. “Maybe not to you. Good luck!”

Yearly disappeared.

Cole looked at Dalton. His friend sighed.

“This is a weird place,” Dalton said.

“Not a bad start.”

“We should probably split up.”

Cole started down the untraveled path to the right, and Dalton proceeded to the left. Soon shrubs, trees, and irregularities in the terrain screened Dalton from view. Reaching more intersections, Cole took a meandering route beside streams and hedges, then entered a corridor of trellises that arched overhead to create a curved ceiling of flowering vines.

A laughing boy raced through one blossoming wall of the corridor, ran along it for a stretch, then lunged through the other side just as a second boy came into view. Though younger than the first, the second boy dashed after him, plunging through the trellis wall.

Approaching the section where the boys had vanished, Cole found no space through which they could have fit. They had passed through solid wood laced with vegetation. More echoes.

Beyond the corridor, Cole followed a circuitous path of gray pebbles around several mounds where dense, thorny shrubs with dark green leaves flourished. Several little paths branched off, ending abruptly at benches. Near one bench, a dignified man in a fancy coat stood very straight. He had a bony nose and thick, wavy, white hair. He was semitransparent, allowing Cole to view the garden directly behind him almost as clearly as the background to either side.

Gathering his courage, Cole turned down the path that led to the man's bench and stared up at him. He was quite tall. Though the echo had glanced at Cole as he approached, he now acted oblivious to his presence.

"Are you an echo?" Cole asked.

The man glanced down with no hint of a smile. "We both know the answer to that question, which makes it hardly worth asking. Run along."

"I was just trying to start a conversation," Cole explained.

"Your overture was as thrilling as a remark about the weather," the man said flatly, no longer making eye contact.

"I'm looking for information," Cole said.

"I possess vast stockpiles," the man said, examining his fingernails.

"Great."

The man's eyes shifted to regard Cole. "I do not invite common urchins into my confidence. Run along, boy."

"Do you even know who I am?"

The man gave half a smirk. "One of my valets inspected you and your cohorts upon entry. I heard big talk of princesses and Nazeem. You are clearly pretenders." The man drew out a handkerchief and waved him away. "So . . . go pretend."

Cole felt himself getting mad. He knew that probably wasn't smart but couldn't help it. "Shows how much you know."

"Perhaps it does," the man said dryly.

Cole turned away. "Forget it."

"Already done," the man said with relief.

Cole took a few steps. The man made no effort to stop him. He seemed really not to care. Or maybe he was expertly baiting him. Either way, Cole couldn't resist and turned back.

"I've seen three of the princesses," he said.

The stuffy man raised his eyebrows as he polished a cuff link. "Not just one? Three of the five? Extraordinary. And highly credible."

Cole had to bite his tongue to keep from revealing Mira's identity. That wasn't his

secret to share. Maybe leaving was the best option.

“And still you linger,” the man said.

“What can you tell me about Nazeem?” Cole asked.

The man huffed. “You’re right. Forgive me. Seeing as you have offered definitive proof that you are a close associate of many princesses, I shall now divulge all I know about the most perilous personage in the echolands.”

“Nazeem lives in the echolands?” Cole asked.

The man chuckled to himself. “Where did you imagine him? In Necronum?”

“The Fallen Temple.”

“Hmmm,” the man said. “Not everyone has connected Nazeem to that location. It is hardly common knowledge. The Fallen Temple has a physical counterpart in Necronum, but Nazeem has long dwelt inside the portion in the echolands.”

“Nazeem is dead?” Cole asked. That didn’t make sense. At the secret meeting in Junction, Nazeem had talked about returning from captivity.

The man narrowed his eyes. “His body may have perished. Nazeem is far from dead. And you would do well to avoid mentioning him. These are not matters for amateurs to discuss.”

Cole felt his face flush. “Amateur? I’ve seen him, mister. Face-to-face. Have you?”

The man looked down his nose at Cole. “I had you all wrong. Clearly, your ignorance is a complex pretense. You are the most remarkable youth in the five kingdoms. Tell me: How was it that you entered and escaped the Fallen Temple? You are the first I know of to succeed! Did you rescue any princesses along the way?”

“I didn’t go there,” Cole said. “I saw him at a gathering of shapecrafters. And he saw me.”

The man gave a simpering laugh. “You caught wind of that rumor? That much is well done. The gossip in the echolands holds that Nazeem is looking for a mortal boy who roughly meets your description. Am I to believe that the intrepid lad in question is foolish enough to reveal himself to an unknown echo? You are duller than average, my boy, but your audacity almost entertains.”

Cole gave a nervous chuckle. Maybe that hadn’t been a very smart thing to share. “You’re onto me.”

“Of course I am,” the man said. “Had you ever met Nazeem, he would own you body and soul. Now run along.”

Cole walked away. The man seemed to know a lot, but Cole had a feeling that talking more could prove dangerous. Hopefully, the stuffy echo wouldn’t rethink his assumption that Cole was an imposter. The man seemed very sure of himself.

After so much success, Cole expected to find another echo around the next corner but was disappointed. He wandered for at least an hour and saw nothing but vegetation and other mortals, including Joe and Hunter.

Later, feeling thirsty, Cole recalled a fountain inside the shrine that people drank from using cups. He steered back toward the main building, crossing little bridges and occasionally doubling back as footpaths wound astray.

As he approached the tall doors to the shrine, he noticed an elderly man in a large hat and a ragged gray robe sitting in the shadows, knees up, head partially bowed, back to the wall. A deeply tanned hand with dirty fingernails held out a small wicker basket. He didn't glance at Cole or make a gesture, but he was clearly a beggar, and the basket was empty.

Cole fished a spare ringer from his pocket. Hunter had cashed out a bunch of Zeropolitan credits at the train station and given them all a personal stash of ringers, the currency used in the other kingdoms of the Outskirts.

The ringer was silver—worth ten coppers, enough for several good meals. But Hunter was loaded, and Mira had access to big funds too. Even though the beggar wasn't looking directly at him, Cole didn't want to make a show of searching for smaller change.

He dropped the ringer in the basket.

It fell through to the ground.

The man looked up, his toothless smile becoming the widest crease in his seamed face. "Few people notice me. Fewer still make an offering. I'm Sando, young sir, and I hope that I can be of service."

## CHAPTER

# 3

## SANDO

I could use information,” Cole said.

Sando’s smile widened, showing his smooth gums. “That’s just the kind of help I can provide.” He looked Cole up and down, then squinted, making even more wrinkles gather around his eyes. Sando spoke slower, as if his interest had increased. “There is more to you than greets the eye, young sir.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked.

Sando sprang to his feet. “Pick up your ringer. I can’t use it, and there’s no sense in leaving silver on the ground. We’ll find a private place to get acquainted.”

Moving with an easy grace that contradicted his elderly appearance, Sando led the way off the path, skipping over obstacles and sliding around shrubs. Cole tried not to crush any flowers as they followed the outside wall of the shrine, away from the doors. When they reached a shady nook shielded by bushes, Sando sat, crossing his legs. “This will serve.”

Cole knelt in front of him. “Are we supposed to be here? When we first arrived, a guy told us to stay on the paths.”

“I am seldom noticed, and so easily forget such policies,” Sando said. “I would not wish to lead you into trouble. Since we are already here, I recommend avoiding attention. I suppose you could inform any nosy authorities that you were following a wayward echo.”

“Okay,” Cole said, crouching a little lower.

“I take it this is not the first time you have strayed from a path,” Sando said.

“Nobody’s perfect,” Cole admitted, thinking of some of the rules he had broken since arriving in the Outskirts. His adventure with Mira had begun when they ran away from the Sky Raiders. From the High King’s perspective, pretty much all Cole had done since that day was break laws, including when he helped Dalton escape his captors.

“Tell me how I can be of service, young renegade,” Sando said, bowing his head slightly. “What information do you seek?”

“Can you tell me about Nazeem?”

Stillness settled over Sando. “You name a dangerous object of curiosity. Surely, there are brighter matters to investigate. How about directions to a stream that appears to flow uphill? I could hum a forgotten melody, popular in bygone years, which you could now revive? I know several rumors about lost treasure.”

“I’m interested in Nazeem.”

Sando sighed. “What would you have me tell you?”

Cole wasn’t sure how much to divulge. Sando seemed willing to help, but could he be trusted? Cole decided to ask about something that had bothered him when talking to the rude old guy by the bench.

“How can Nazeem be in the echolands but not dead?”

“Many in the echolands are not dead,” Sando said. “I am not dead.”

“I’m new to Necronum.”

“An echo mirrors the physical body, not the spirit,” Sando explained. “The echo is not the essence. It is not the lifespark. Like the physical body, an echo is a container for a lifespark. Unlike a physical body, an echo can continue to function without the lifespark. A dead echo can walk and talk without a lifespark.”

“So you can be a live echo or a dead echo,” Cole said.

Sando gave a nod. “With a dead echo, the essence or lifespark has moved on, leaving the functional shell behind. These dead echoes can move and talk, but they lack a will and have no new ideas. Over time they degenerate into madness. A regular echo like me still has his essence. Though my mortal body has perished, in the echolands I am alive. There are also bright echoes. They form when death weavers temporarily leave their physical bodies behind and cross to the echolands.”

“Nazeem is a bright echo?” Cole asked.

“Doubtful,” Sando said. “He has been here too long. Any physical body he once possessed should be long gone. He was a being of great power imprisoned long ago for the safety of the entire world. Another topic might be of greater interest. I could divulge the location of a huge abandoned tree house. . . .”

“Nazeem must be a bright echo,” Cole said. “How else would he break free and return to the five kingdoms to lead the shapecrafters?”

Sando leaned toward Cole and lowered his voice. “Where did you hear that?”

Cole appreciated that Sando took him seriously. But he worried about revealing too much. “Just rumors.”

Sando studied him closely. “Few know of shapecraft. Fewer still know Nazeem believes he can escape confinement in the near future. Where have you learned such rumors?”

“I don’t know how much to tell you,” Cole said frankly.

Sando fixed him with a searching gaze. “I would like to help you, young sir. But some of what I know could be hazardous. I do not wish to endanger you. How can I gauge how much to share without understanding what you already know?”

“You don’t work for Nazeem?” Cole asked.

“Like many echoes, I trade in information,” Sando said. “My affiliations and loyalties vary. Had you wanted harmless knowledge, I would have been as free with it as you were with your silver. Nazeem is another matter. We all must speak of him with caution. Are you a shapecrafter?”

Cole blinked. “No.”

Sando narrowed his gaze. “I can perceive your shaping power. It writhes like a dozen tangled serpents trying to devour one another. It is maimed. I have observed shapecrafters who tampered with their abilities to achieve unique results.”

“My power is a mess,” Cole admitted. “Shapecraft was involved. But it was an attack. I can’t use my power anymore.” He remembered the time in Junction when contact with the Founding Stone had temporarily reawakened his abilities, but he didn’t want to get that specific with Sando.

The beggar winced. “Ruthless and foul. Who had the power to do such a thing?”

“She was called Morgassa,” Cole said.

Sando’s eyes widened. “You faced Morgassa? And lived?”

“You believe me?” Cole asked.

“I can plainly see that you believe it,” Sando said. “I suppose you could be insane or deluded. I had an aunt who held long conversations with her flowers.”

“I helped defeat Morgassa,” Cole said. “She damaged my shaping power.”

“To have challenged Morgassa and lived, you must know the Pemberton girls,” Sando said with awe. “You are helping them, I take it?”

“Trying,” Cole said.

“I have discovered a young celebrity,” Sando said. “You must have some connection to Honor. You’re aware that she came here not long ago?”

Cole decided he might as well come clean. “I’m looking for Destiny and Honor.”

“Honor is kept, not found,” Sando said with a sly grin. “And need we search for destiny? It tends to find us whether we like it or not.”

“I’m talking about the princesses,” Cole clarified patiently.



“You want to help the Pemberton girls?” Sando asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“How did you become involved?”

“Long story.”

“You were not born in the Outskirts,” Sando said. “You came from Outside.”

“You can tell?”

“Experience.”

“I hope to get home someday.”

Sando hooted with laughter. “No small tasks for you, young sir.”

Cole felt his cheeks warm up. “It won’t be easy.”

Sando pointed at him. “That puts it mildly. You interest me. You are no ordinary boy. Tell me your name.”

“Cole.”

“You must sleep lightly these days,” Sando said. “A knife under your pillow, and a rope by the window. I discern that Stafford Pemberton is not your friend. Nor is Owandell or Nazeem. Who do you serve?”

“The princesses,” Cole said. “I got involved with them directly.”

“I see now why you desire knowledge of Nazeem,” Sando said. “A shadowy subject. His precise origin remains unknown. We’re aware that in mortality he was a shaper of extraordinary power. From his place of confinement in the Fallen Temple, he has reached out to humans and taught them shapecraft and has recruited many echoes as well. For an imprisoned being, he wields considerable influence in the echolands and across the five kingdoms. Like you, he intently wishes to find Destiny Pemberton, and her sister Honor as well. He is also searching for a young man who fits your description. Are you aware?”

Cole’s mouth was dry. “Yeah,” he managed, sick dread coiling in his gut.

Sando held up a hand. “Do not be alarmed, giver of silver. I trade in information but am happy to guard your secret. Others may not extend the same courtesy. You cannot hide for long. Not in Necronum, where so many echoes prowl. They will notice your deformed shaping power.”

“How can I avoid Nazeem?” Cole asked.

“The real question is how to avoid the mortals and echoes who serve him,” Sando said. “Nazeem is trapped in the Fallen Temple. You are beyond his physical reach.”

“Unless he gets free,” Cole said. “Can he come back from the echolands?”

Sando’s eyes flashed with interest. “How? It would defy nature. But Nazeem seems convinced he has found a way, and so do his followers. Who am I to name anything

impossible? The whispers suggest he expects freedom in the near future. But what does that mean to a being who has been imprisoned for so long? Is the near future later this century? Or next week?"

"From what I heard, it sounded closer to next week," Cole said.

"This could be," Sando said. "I know little more about Nazeem. I suspect you have more intimate knowledge of him than I do."

"Is the Fallen Temple far from here?" Cole asked.

"Very far," Sando said. "If you desire a long and prosperous life, may I suggest you keep it that way? In fact, you might consider departing Necronum. I understand Zeropolis has many conveniences."

Cole shook his head. "I can't. There are things I have to do here."

Sando considered him intently. "What information do you most desire?"

"You can probably guess," Cole said. "Do you know where I can find the princesses? Destiny or Honor?"

"Of course this would be your priority," Sando said, rubbing his hands. "I cannot tell you the present location of either sister. But I do know a place where Destiny has been. You could acquire her trail there. There would be risk involved."

"Everything is a risk these days," Cole said. "Lots of people are after me. The sooner I find the princesses, the less time they'll have to catch me."

Squinting intently, Sando lowered his voice to a whisper. "This is one of my most guarded nuggets of information. I survive by trading knowledge. Would you grant me a favor in exchange for the knowledge you seek?"

Cole fell silent. Hunter had warned him to be very careful bargaining with echoes and to make no binding oaths. What might Sando want? Had everything until now been a setup?

Sando smiled, wrinkles gathering at the corners of his mouth and eyes. "Do not fear a trade! I have not yet spoken my terms. They are very lenient."

"What's the deal?" Cole asked warily.

"I could not keep your silver," Sando said. "Instead, favor me with a different offering. Maintain the silver ringer in your custody, on my behalf, until you give it to the person I designate. While you retain the ringer, I will serve you as best I can from the echolands."

"How will I know who gets the ringer?" Cole asked.

"I'll bind the ringer to both of us," Sando said. "That way, while you retain the ringer, I'll be able to reach your mind."

"I was warned to avoid binding oaths," Cole said uneasily.

Sando waved his hands. "I don't mean a binding oath. Avoiding those is a good policy. Under a bound oath, you would owe me a particular service, with a punishment attached should you fail. This is not my proposal. Not all bindings involve punishments. Some can simply help echoes and mortals find and trust one another. I would bind the ringer to us so I can help you avoid losing it by accident, and so I can tell you who I want to have it."

"Isn't that a lot of trouble just to give somebody a ringer?" Cole asked.

"Donating the ringer will bring me joy," Sando said. "But my motives go beyond generosity. Echoes spend our existence resisting the call of the Other."

"The other what?"

"Just the Other, young sir. The unnamed realms beyond the echolands. They summon us. At first the invitation is easy to resist. But the pull increases over time. I have withstood the call for many long decades. Interaction with the material world helps us resist. Some echoes collaborate with mortals to resolve matters of personal concern. For others, it is a question of survival. In short, having a ringer to give in Necronum will help keep my echo alive."

That seemed like a fair reason to Cole, but he had just met Sando and didn't want to be reckless. "How do I know you're not tricking me?"

"Young sir, what have I to gain from deceit?" Sando asked with a chiding smile. "The binding depends on the quality of my information. If my tip fails to lead you to Destiny's trail, the binding will unravel, as if it never happened. I'm trading a platinum for a copper. Your task is easy, but this knowledge will be most difficult to uncover elsewhere."

"What if you lead Nazeem's people to me?" Cole said.

"As a token of good faith, and to give you maximum assurance of my worthy intentions, I will pledge to serve you and only you until I instruct you to deliver the ringer."

"You can't break that pledge?"

"Absolutely not," Sando said. "I'll bind it. But in return you will need to keep our arrangement secret."

"Wait a minute," Cole said. "That seems weird. I want to check with my friends before I make any deals."

Sando shook his head. "This bargain is not with a group. That gets hazy. This offer is for you and only you, good now or never. The secrecy protects me. Some unscrupulous death weavers use their power to bind and command echoes. You are no

death weaver. If you can't talk about me to anyone, no death weavers will interfere with our bargain. Just like you, I deserve to protect myself."

"Will you give me a minute to think?"

"Be my guest, young sir. No need to rush."

Cole folded his arms. Mira and his friends had come here to find information that might lead them to Destiny, and this was a chance to get it. What if one of the others had already learned what Sando would tell him? Or worse, what if somebody else already had a better lead?

Then again, what if the others had learned nothing? Delivering a ringer didn't sound too bad, especially since Sando pledged to serve only him until it happened. The echo seemed knowledgeable and friendly. Who knew when his help might come in handy?

Hunter had warned not to make binding oaths and to be careful about striking bargains. This wasn't a binding oath, and the bargain seemed innocent. Even if one of the others discovered a better lead, Sando's requirement was simple, and the echo could prove useful in other ways.

"All right," Cole said. "How do we make it official?"

"Very good, young sir," Sando said, his head bobbing. "We will make quite a team—I'm sure of it. You still have the ringer you tried to give me?"

Cole hadn't returned it to his pocket yet. He held it up.

"Set it down and tell me that it belongs to me," Sando said.

Cole placed the small silver hoop on the dirt in front of Sando. "This ringer is now yours."

Leaning forward, the beggar waved his hands over the silver ringer, fingers fluttering. "If you take up the ringer again, Cole, you will hold it on my behalf. You will keep the ringer until I designate a recipient. In return, I will tell you about a place Destiny Pemberton visited where you can pick up her trail, though doing so is your task, not mine. You will keep our arrangement secret, including my identity, and I pledge to serve you and only you until I ask you to deliver the ringer. While the ringer is in your possession, it will be bound to you, and to me, so as not to go missing before the conclusion of our arrangement."

Sando stopped speaking but kept stirring the air with his hands.

"What now?" Cole asked.

"If you agree to these terms, pick up the ringer," Sando said.

"What if we don't find Destiny's trail?" Cole asked.

"Then you owe me nothing for flawed information. The binding will not hold."

“What if I mess up?” Cole asked. “What happens if I tell about you?”

“If I hold up my end, you won’t be able to dispose of the ringer until I say so, and you won’t be able to tell anyone about me.”

Cole hesitated. “That sounds like I’ll be bound. Are you sure this isn’t a bound oath?”

“A bound oath would have a punishment for breaking your word,” Sando said. “This binding will simply hold you to what you promised if I keep up my end. And it holds me to what I promised if you keep up yours.”

“Sounds like it will control me.”

“Control you?” Sando cried with a laugh. “You will have to keep the ringer, and you won’t be able to tell my secret. Otherwise, you will be in full control of yourself. If you don’t mean to keep the agreement, you shouldn’t make it. I intend to fulfill my part and hold you to your promise.”

“I don’t know,” Cole said, wondering how the deal could backfire.

“This is simple,” Sando said calmly. “If I ask too much, walk away. You are under no obligation. I see this as a generous offer. I require a minor favor in exchange for very valuable information. If you see it otherwise, good day to you, young sir. May you travel prosperous roads.”

“Can’t you just tell me?” Cole begged.

“It was my pleasure to provide free information about Nazeem,” Sando said. “We could discuss other matters. But I cannot tell you about Destiny for free. I can’t divulge such precious knowledge without some form of recompense. Binding myself to the material world is how I survive.”

Cole waited.

Sando placed his hands on his knees, as if to rise.

Cole picked up the silver ringer.

## CHAPTER

# 4

## KNOWLEDGE

A faint tremor rippled through Cole. Not a physical vibration—more a disturbance of his emotions, intangible but unmistakable. The sensation briefly allowed him to feel his shaping power.

“Good choice, young sir,” Sando approved, rocking happily. “Destiny Pemberton visited the Cave of Memory not many months ago.”

“Is that nearby?” Cole asked.

“Three days by horse or coach,” Sando said. “You seem unfazed. I expected more excitement. How much do you know about the Cave of Memory?”

“Nothing,” Cole said.

Sando grinned, gums gleaming wetly. “Certain places in Necronum are woven differently from others. No echoes can enter the Cave of Memory. The interior has no parallel in the echolands. After entering, any mortal who departs the cave leaves behind a lasting impression that functions like a dead echo.”

“An echo forms?” Cole asked.

“Not a true echo,” Sando said. “An echo only forms once for each person. No second chances. It happens upon death, or earlier if a death weaver crosses to our side and becomes a bright echo. Such echoes remain bright for as long as they can return to their physical bodies. The constructs inside the Cave of Memory are not true echoes. Most call them imprints. They have no physical substance. But they retain the form and memories of whoever they represent.”

Cole had gotten used to encountering the impossible in the Outskirts, but this was still hard to process. “Are you saying I can talk to Destiny’s memories?”

“In essence, yes,” Sando said. “The imprint you meet will look like Destiny and will have the same memories and personality Destiny had when she exited the cave. But the imprint cannot learn or change.”

“She’ll be like a figment,” Cole said. “A semblance made of illusion.”

“Similar,” Sando said. “Finding Destiny’s imprint could be a challenge. The cave is not small. Many imprints have accumulated over the years. All who enter pay the same price.”

“I’ll leave behind an imprint,” Cole realized.

Sando tapped his temple and pointed at Cole. “At minimum, proof you were there. At worst, your imprint could impart secrets to others.”

“If I wouldn’t tell a secret, would my imprint?” Cole asked.

“Depends,” Sando said. “Can you be tricked?”

“I guess.”

“If so, your imprint could be fooled as well. An imprint is intangible, so it can’t be tortured or threatened. But your imprint also can’t learn new concepts. Its only tools would be everything you knew and believed when you left the cave. The imprint can’t alter an opinion, develop a skill, or entertain a fresh thought. There is no inspiration for imprints. No new memories. Their nature tends to cause exploitable weaknesses.”

“Makes me wonder how much I trust myself,” Cole said.

“A sensible concern, young sir,” Sando said. “But if you truly wish to find Destiny, the cave will offer you a chance.”

“I could probably learn a lot about what led to her current problems,” Cole said. “You told me that dead echoes can go crazy over time. Does the same happen to imprints?”

“I understand that it can,” Sando said. “The reaction would partly depend on the person imprinted. The imprint would have no physical needs or appetites, but it will be no happier to remain trapped inside the Cave of Memory than you would be. If such a fate would drive you mad, your imprint will have the same response.”

“The imprint would have no hope of escape,” Cole said. He tried to picture how it would feel to be stuck forever in some cave. “Does the imprint suffer?”

Sando gave a light chuckle. “An imprint might seem to suffer. It could act distressed. But the imprint has no life. No will. It only imitates something that was alive. It’s a replica. The imprint can convey information. It can mimic emotion. But its feelings are no more real than those of a puppet or a footprint.”

“Is the Cave of Memory hard to find?” Cole asked.

“The location is no great secret,” Sando said. “Many could direct you. The closest village to the cave is called Rincomere.”

“Well, thanks,” Cole said.

“This is not good-bye, young sir,” Sando said. “Our partnership is just beginning. Save your farewells for after you deliver the ringer. A final matter. You are traveling

alone?”

“No,” Cole admitted.

“How will you explain your new knowledge to your friends?”

“That’s right. I agreed not to tell them about you. They’ll want to know my source.”

“Try not to lie,” Sando advised. “Falsehoods have a way of unraveling, especially in Necronum. Do your companions know about your damaged power?”

“Yeah.”

“Report that you met an old semblance who recognized your mangled power and took pity on you. This is all true. You had desperate need for rare knowledge in my possession. I could have required an exhausting quest. I could have demanded vast treasures. Instead, I made a generous bargain. And if they ask my name?”

“Pretend I don’t know?” Cole tried.

“That would be a lie,” Sando chided. “Try something like, ‘Good question. I should have found out.’”

“I should have and I did,” Cole said.

“Imply the lie,” Sando said. “Don’t state it outright.”

“You’re good at this.”

“I lived a long mortal life, and many years as an echo besides,” Sando said. “I’ve had ample time to practice.”

“Cole?” a voice called.

Cole put a finger to his lips so he could listen. It sounded like Joe. He seemed to be a fair distance away.

“Cole! Cole? Come to the shrine. Cole?”

“Your friends are searching for you,” Sando said. “Go to them.”

On impulse, Cole attempted to drop the silver ringer. He swung his hand forward, but his fingers refused to let go. He tried once more with no success.

“Did you think I was bluffing?” Sando asked.

“I just wanted to see what it felt like,” Cole said, pocketing the ringer and then flexing his fingers. They moved fine when he wasn’t trying to drop it. “Thanks for the info.”

Sando folded his hands on his lap, closed his eyes, and smiled. “We will meet again, giver of silver. May each step bring you closer to prosperity.” The old beggar faded and disappeared.

“Cole?” Joe called again, nearer this time.

Cole stood up and peered over the bushes. Joe was coming back toward the shrine



along a trail. "I'm coming," Cole answered, dodging around vegetation.

As Cole reached the path, a short woman in a silk robe marched up to him. "Leaving the footpaths is prohibited throughout the garden," she scolded.

Cole considered a joke about going to the bathroom but reconsidered given her stern expression. "An echo led me," he explained. "I'm sorry."

"Any respectable echo knows to stay on the paths," she complained.

"It's my first time here," Cole apologized.

"And your last if you don't watch yourself," she said.

"Is there a problem?" Joe asked, approaching. He was tall and well-dressed, with a stubbly beard. Cole could imagine Joe back home in California, playing with his band. Joe flashed his most disarming smile.

"He's with you?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Joe said. "Thanks for finding him. I'd lost sight of him."

"Don't give me the lovable-scoundrel routine," the woman said. "It carries no weight at the Seven-Cornered Shrine. Is he Cole?"

"That's right," Joe confirmed.

She squared up to face him, hands on her hips. "Please don't raise your voice in the gardens. You were crying out like you would for a dog lost in the wilderness! Have you no sense of decorum? This is a place of tranquility. Be responsible! The boy wandered off the path."

"My apologies," Joe said, placing a hand on his chest. "Won't happen again."

"It won't for sure if I ban you," she said. "Watch yourselves. You've been warned. You're on your way out I hope?"

"You guessed it," Joe said. "Good day."

He laid a hand on Cole's shoulder and guided him along the path toward the shrine.

"Where are the others?" Cole murmured as they entered the ornate building.

"Out in front," Joe said. "Sally got a disturbing tip, so we all cleared out. You were the last."

"Did she get any leads on her sisters?"

"Wait until we have more privacy," Joe said.

A large coach awaited them in front of the shrine. Joe guided Cole to the horse-drawn vehicle, and they both climbed inside the compartment. Cole joined Hunter and Dalton on a cushioned bench facing Mira, Jace, and Joe. Jace drew the curtains closed as the coach started rolling.

"Where were you?" Mira asked Cole. "We looked all over."

“He was right by the shrine,” Joe said. “He’d gone off the path into the bushes.”

“I needed a restroom too,” Dalton said.

“No,” Cole said. “I was with an echo.”

“How much did you spill?” Jace asked, an edge to his voice.

“I told who I was looking for,” Cole said. “I didn’t say anything about you guys.”

“We can speak freely,” Hunter said. “I’m blocking the area inside the coach from echoes.”

“Sally learned some scary stuff,” Dalton explained to Cole.

“I met a woman from my childhood,” Mira said. “Zelna Laperne. She was a maid who spent time with me at the castle. She’s been an echo for decades now.”

“Did she have any leads on your sisters?” Cole asked, unsure what exactly he hoped to hear. Part of him wanted the info he got from Sando to save the day.

“Zelna could only confirm that Nazeem is looking for them,” Mira said. “It sounds like he’s hunting you too, Cole.”

“He didn’t seem happy the last time we met,” Cole said.

“Zelna warned me that the shrine is swarming with his agents,” Mira said. “Nazeem’s influence in the echolands has grown really strong almost overnight. Nobody had heard his name until recently. When Zelna recognized me, she made contact to caution me to stay away from shrines. They’re being heavily watched. I thought we should regroup before asking more questions.”

“I helped Mira round up the others,” Joe said. “We told everyone to abort. Nobody gained any vital knowledge about Honor or Destiny, but I don’t think we gave ourselves away, either.”

“Hard to be sure,” Hunter said. “If a friend recognized Mira, an enemy could have as well. Dalton told us that he and Cole brought up the princesses with Yearly. Any time we tell an echo who we’re looking for, we run the risk of getting discovered by Nazeem.”

“What were you doing off in the bushes with an echo, Cole?” Jace asked. “How much did you spill?”

“It was an old echo,” Cole said. “He was friendly and guessed a lot about me. He could see the damage to my shaping power.”

“If he could see your power, he might have targeted you,” Hunter said. “Nazeem knows about your damaged power.”

“The echo didn’t come to me,” Cole said. “I went to him.”

“If he was any good, he may have positioned himself where you would see him,” Hunter said. “In an ambush, you let your prey approach. How nosy was he?”

“Medium nosy,” Cole said. “I think I got good info from him.”

“What?” Mira asked.

“Destiny went to the Cave of Memory,” Cole said, hoping the information would impress them.

“Really?” Mira asked. “How long ago?”

“A few months,” Cole said.

“He told you this freely?” Hunter asked.

“I have to do a favor for him,” Cole said.

“But no bindings,” Hunter clarified.

“Well . . . not with punishments attached,” Cole said.

“Wait,” Hunter said. “You let him do a binding? I told everybody to avoid bound oaths.”

“There was no punishment,” Cole repeated.

“I guess, strictly speaking, bound oaths have punishments,” Hunter said. “But if this echo connected the favor to a binding, that’s almost the same thing. What was the binding?”

Cole found himself unable to explain. After two failed attempts, he managed to reply, “I can’t say.”

Hunter shared a worried glance with Joe and Mira. “He won’t let you tell? That’s part of the bargain? Who was this echo? What was his name?”

Once again Cole couldn’t get the words past his lips. “I can’t say.”

“What did he look like?” Hunter asked.

After failing to give details, Cole shrugged. “I can’t.”

Looking shaken, Hunter wiped his eyes.

“Is this bad?” Jace asked.

“Maybe,” Hunter said. He studied Cole intently. “My guess is the binding seemed innocent?”

“Yes,” Cole said, relieved he could spit out that much.

“Do you see any way it could endanger us?” Hunter pressed.

“No,” Cole said, relieved again. “It was a very simple request.”

“That’s good at least,” Hunter said. “Did the binding require loyalty from the echo?”

Cole couldn’t answer. He tried to nod but failed. “I can’t say.”

“You can’t give us any details?” Hunter guessed.

“Yes,” Cole said.

“But you’re confident it can’t backfire?” Hunter asked.

“Yes,” Cole said. “It seemed like the echo did me a favor.”

“We’re so doomed,” Jace muttered.

“Maybe not,” Hunter said. “Cole isn’t stupid. Since the binding is keeping him from answering my questions, the info he got has to be solid. The binding wouldn’t hold if it was based on a lie.”

“But he could have been dealing with an agent of Nazeem,” Mira said. “We don’t know what Cole has to do. There could be a trap built into the binding.”

Hunter looked at Joe, who held up both hands defensively. “I’ve never been to Necronum. You and Mira know much more than me about this place.”

“We could have been exposed at the shrine in other ways,” Hunter said. “Mira could have been recognized. We didn’t have lots of interactions with echoes, but we already might have accidentally given the wrong hint to the wrong person. At least Cole got a lead. If we want some serious background about Destiny, we know where to go.”

“Should we split up from Cole?” Jace asked. “We know to visit the Cave of Memory. We don’t need him to get there. Maybe he can go his own way for a while until we see how the binding plays out?”

Cole noticed Dalton looking at him. If they wanted to take off and look for Jenna, this was a golden opportunity.

“Not unless he wants to leave,” Mira said firmly. “Cole has saved us more than once. If he doesn’t think he left an opening for trouble, that’s good enough for me. He may have struck a good bargain. That does happen. And even if he didn’t, we’ll figure it out together.”

“Every minute we’re in Necronum, we risk blowing our cover,” Hunter said. “The road won’t be smooth no matter what precautions we take. We should count ourselves lucky that we know where to start our search. The Cave of Memory is roughly the same direction as Destiny’s star. I think we should head that way and find a decent inn.”

“Sounds good to me,” Cole said, avoiding eye contact with Dalton.

“Nice work, Cole,” Mira said. “We didn’t expose ourselves too much at the shrine, and we still walked away with new knowledge. Without your binding, we’d know nothing.”

“I hope it doesn’t get us in trouble,” Cole said.

“So do I,” Jace said heavily. “So do I.”

## CHAPTER

# 5

## HORSES

Cole snapped awake, certain he needed to get out of bed. Sitting up, he wiped grit from the corners of his eyes. Orange moonlight filtered into the dim room through the cracks in the shutters. He could hear Dalton breathing evenly.

It looked suspiciously like the middle of the night. He heard no threatening sounds. Why exactly did he need to get out of bed? His bladder didn't feel strained. Had he been dreaming? If so, he couldn't recall any details.

Something felt wrong. He hadn't awakened in a natural way. Cole remembered arriving at the large inn as the brightest stars began to appear in the sky. After a hearty meal of beef ribs, potatoes, and bread, he and Dalton had decided to share a room. Hunter had bunked with Jace. Joe and Mira each had their own rooms.

Was he being paranoid? Should he go back to sleep? The residue of his urgent feeling remained, but Cole slouched onto his pillow. He couldn't get comfortable. He had no desire to close his eyes. An internal tug coaxed him to get up. He stretched one hand toward a far corner of the room. That somehow felt right.

Weird! Was he turning psychic or losing it?

Cole kicked back his covers and slid his legs off the edge of the thin mattress. The far corner of the room inexplicably beckoned.

He got out of bed and crossed to the corner, where he had left his clothes on a chair. Almost without thinking, he picked up his pants and started rummaging through the pockets.

A sense of relief struck as his fingers closed around a ringer. Pulling it out, he found it was silver. Had it been a mistake to leave the ringer in his pants? Did it always need to be touching him?

*Cole?* a familiar voice spoke in his mind. Even without physically hearing the word, Cole recognized the speaker as Sando.

"Yeah," Cole whispered.

*Thank Fortune I could reach you, Sando continued. Depart the inn immediately. You and anyone in your company. Ride north for now. Stay off the roads. Some local Enforcers have caught wind of you. They're coming your way. Hurry!*

“Thanks,” Cole said, crossing to Dalton.

*My pleasure, young sir. I'll try to reach you again. Keep our ringer in hand.*

“Got it,” Cole murmured. He shook Dalton’s shoulder. “Get up! We have to scam!”

Dalton gave a soft groan. “Huh?”

“Enforcers are coming.”

That grabbed his attention. Dalton lurched from the bed, his hands breaking his fall before his feet followed.

“How much time to we have?” Cole whispered, reaching out with his mind.

“What?” Dalton asked.

“Grab your clothes,” Cole said. Clenching the ringer in his fist, Cole whispered, “Can you hear me—”

He meant to say Sando, but the word wouldn’t form on his lips. Probably because Dalton was listening. Cole sensed no reply.

“You okay?” Dalton asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Cole said. He quickly dressed. “Get Joe.” Cole dashed to Hunter’s room, then knocked softly. Though haste was needed, he didn’t want to announce their departure to the entire inn.

Hunter opened the door, squinting, hair mussed. “What’s up?” Beyond him, Jace sat up in bed, a dagger in his hand.

“I got a message from the echo,” Cole said. “Some Enforcers are coming. He told me we need to get out of here and ride north. He didn’t want us on the roads.”

Hunter scowled thoughtfully.

“Think it’s a trap?” Cole asked.

Hunter gave a quick shake of his head. “If the echo meant us harm, it would be easier to let the Enforcers take us here. There’s no point in warning us unless the help is real. We’ll have to ditch the coach and steal horses. Wake the others.”

Hunter went back into his room. Dalton was talking to Joe. Cole jogged to Mira’s room and knocked gently. After a moment he knocked again.

“Hello?” He could barely hear her from behind the door.

“It’s Cole,” he said, keeping his voice low.

The door cracked open, showing a sliver of her face, including most of one eye.

“Enforcers are coming,” Cole said. “I got a tip from the echo.”

“I’ll be right out.”

The door closed.

Feeling antsy, Cole looked up and down the hall. Dalton had entered Joe’s room. Every second seemed precarious. Would Enforcers come pounding up the stairs? If so, Cole and his friends had little to rely on. No gadgets from Zeropolis. No special weapons. Only Hunter could shape here, and he had warned there wasn’t much that death weaving could do in combat.

Squeezing the ringer in his fist, Cole tried to reestablish a mental link with Sando. *Are you there?* he thought intently. *Can you hear me, Sando?*

Cole sensed no reply. Apparently, the ringer had limited use as a communicator. Maybe it took a lot of effort from Sando? Or some weaving? Could echoes shape? He pocketed the ringer.

Joe, Dalton, Hunter, and Jace exited their rooms and gathered near Cole.

“What weapons do we have?” Cole asked.

“Your Jumping Sword is in the coach,” Hunter said. “Mira’s too. I haven’t caught up to any of my stashes of Necronum equipment yet. I have nothing more than knives right now. We were counting on secrecy.”

“What are the Enforcers like here?” Dalton asked.

“They use conventional weapons,” Hunter said. “Bows, swords, spears—all that. Unless they’re very powerful weavers, they tend to be expert soldiers. A lot of them rely on echoes for information. They have echoes follow people or set up invisible sentries.”

“Have you been communicating with echoes?” Joe wondered.

“I like to work with certain echoes,” Hunter said. “It’s been a while since I visited Necronum. I reached out to some of my most trusted contacts but haven’t heard back. It can take time. Confiding in random echoes can be risky. After the shrine I thought it best to wait for an echo I really trust.”

“Can echoes attack?” Cole asked.

Hunter held out a hand and waggled it. “Not usually in a direct way. They can scare you. They can distract. If you’re not careful, they can bind you. But usually the big danger is if they share information you want kept secret. Like your location.”

Mira emerged from her room. “What’s the plan?”

“A coach is fine for travel but bad for a getaway,” Hunter said. “We’ll borrow some horses from the stable. I checked when we arrived. There are several.”

“You checked?” Dalton asked.

Hunter shrugged. “You didn’t? We’re on the run! I’ll leave money. You’ve all

ridden?"

"Some of us more than others," Cole said. "But yeah."

Hunter led the way to the stairs. "Do we know a timeframe?"

"I was just told to hurry," Cole said.

"Did we pay the innkeeper?" Dalton asked.

"In advance," Joe said.

"Did we leave a letter thanking the cook for dinner?" Jace mocked.

"Let's go," Hunter said.

They moved in silence from the bottom of the stairs across the dim common room. Embers glowing on the hearth provided most of the light. Jace held his dagger ready.

Cole slipped out the front door after Hunter. Stars sparkled in the sky overhead. A dull, red moon shed muted light. Glancing up, Cole shuffled to a stop.

Some of the stars were neatly arranged into words.

The writing was not large but distinct.

NO MORE STARS.

Cole turned to Mira, who was looking up as well.

"Mother," she said. "Honor's and Destiny's stars aren't in the sky anymore. Somebody must have caught on."

"Now all the Outskirts knows," Jace said.

"Almost nobody will get what it means," Mira said. "Mother had to get the message to me and my sisters. Especially to me, so I'd know not to stop looking for Destiny just because the stars are gone."

"What now?" Joe asked.

"We need to get away," Mira said. "The Cave of Memory matters more than ever. It's now our only lead."

"Come on," Hunter said. They trotted across the yard toward the stables. Hunter first went to where the coach was parked. No horses were currently attached to the vehicle. After scouring the compartment, he handed Cole his Jumping Sword, Mira hers, and passed out knives to Dalton and Joe.

Hunter then entered the stables. He stopped so abruptly that Cole collided with his back.

"Sorry," Cole said, grabbing his brother's shoulders half to keep Hunter from falling and half to steady himself.

"No," Hunter said, ignoring Cole, real despair in his voice. "I don't believe it."

"What?" Jace asked from behind.



“The horses are gone,” Hunter said, racing along the row of stalls. He ran outside the building and soon returned. “All of them. The horses for our coach, plus eight others I saw here earlier tonight.”

“Sabotage,” Mira said. “Are we being watched?”

“At least by echoes,” Hunter said, looking around. “Come on.”

The inn was situated near a crossroads. Cole followed Hunter to the intersection. Empty roads stretched in four directions. Hunter paused and raised a finger to his lips. The others stopped and listened. The unmistakable rumble of galloping hoofbeats drummed in the distance.

“Not good,” Cole muttered, sliding a hand into his pocket to touch the silver ringer. He still sensed no contact from Sando.

“What do we do?” Dalton asked, hysteria creeping into his tone.

“We split up,” Hunter said, calmly assuming command. “Two by two. Whoever stays free rescues the others. The riders are coming from the west. Joe and Mira will go south. Dalton and Jace will travel east. Cole and I will head north. Stay off the roads. Eventually make your way toward the town of Rincomere, north and west of here.”

After Hunter fell silent, the approaching hoofbeats did all the talking. The riders couldn’t be more than a few minutes away. This was bad. They could all go down tonight. Without shaping, Cole and his friends were no match for trained soldiers. Panic threatened to take over, but Cole resisted.

“What if echoes are already tailing us?” Cole asked. “Won’t they lead the Enforcers right to us?”

“Let me check,” Hunter said. Sitting cross-legged on the edge of the road, he closed his eyes, made fists, and pressed his knuckles together.

Cole shared curious glances with Jace and Dalton.

“Are you praying?” Jace asked.

Hunter gave no reply.

“Maybe Mira and I should get started,” Joe proposed.

Eyes still closed, Hunter held up a finger, asking him to wait. Hunter flinched, eyes squeezing tighter. His head jerked a little. He pushed his knuckles together tighter, arms trembling. Then he opened his eyes.

“Okay,” Hunter said. “There were a couple of echoes spying on us. I took care of them. Let’s hurry. Stay safe!”

“He means die bravely,” Cole amended, earning a smile from Jace.

Hunter started running along the road to the north. Cole caught up and ran beside

him. Glancing back, Cole saw Joe and Mira racing along the edge of the road in the opposite direction. Dalton and Jace dashed eastward.

“What did you do to the echoes?” Cole asked.

“I confronted them,” Hunter said. “After opening my mind to the echolands, I found a couple of echoes there. I worked a weaving on them that forced them to depart. It was the best I could manage. A full binding could have imprisoned them or even destroyed them. But I’m not that good yet.”

Cole was already panting. “This is a fast pace.”

“We won’t outlast horses,” Hunter said. “Our best bet is to blow our energy before they get too close and hope they never see us.” He veered off the road, running across farmland.

Cole kept up. “What if they find us?”

“If they come this way, we split up,” Hunter said. “We have to stay out of their hands.”

Cole understood. He and Hunter couldn’t hope to outfight the Enforcers. And if they got caught, who knew what would come next? Owandell led the Enforcers, and he served Nazeem. Cole had made powerful enemies. Would they experiment with his mangled shaping ability? Torture him? Kill him? Anything was possible.

Hunter had been an Enforcer. If they were aware that he had changed sides, who knew what they might do to him?

Cole caught his foot on a clump of dirt and went down hard, tasting soil. He scrambled back to his feet. Cole missed a lot of things about Zeropolis, but having a battle suit enhance his speed and endurance was currently at the top of the list. Hunter slowed until Cole caught up, then poured on the speed again.

They passed a line of trees into another cultivated field. The trees helped screen them from the road. The pounding hoofbeats grew louder.

“The riders turned north,” Hunter said. “All of them, I think. Good for the others. Bad for us. Could mean they’re specifically after you.”

“How would they know I went north?” Cole asked.

“Weaving involves knowing things,” Hunter said. “For some weavers, the skill goes beyond using echoes for tips. They sense echoes and people, sometimes across great distances. We call them perceptives.”

“You think we have a perceptive tracking us?” Cole asked.

“It would be rotten luck,” Hunter said. “We’ll know soon.”

Cole ran harder, studying the ground in the dull red moonlight, trying not to fall. He gripped the silver ringer in his hand but still received no advice. He wondered if

Sando might have been one of the echoes Hunter had driven away.

Hunter shoved the back of Cole's shoulder, causing him to tumble to the dirt.

"Lie still," Hunter commanded in a stage whisper, changing course a bit. "It's your best chance. I'll try to mislead them."

Flat on his stomach, Cole watched his brother sprint away. He supposed staying low was his best bet for hiding in an empty field.

The sound of the hoofbeats changed as the horses left the road, muffled by the softer soil of the field. Beyond the line of trees dividing the field where Cole waited from the next, he detected flickers of motion.

In the other direction, Hunter ran in a crouch. He was almost to the far end of the field.

It didn't feel right to let his brother draw their attention away. Then again, Hunter was a leader among the Enforcers. There was still a good chance none of them knew that he had defected and was helping the resistance. Maybe Hunter could bluff his way out of trouble.

Cole decided to trust Hunter's judgment and stay put. His eyes strayed to the sky.  
NO MORE STARS.

Six Enforcers galloped past the tree line, drawing his attention earthward. They rode dark horses and wore black armor.

And they came straight at Cole.

Allowing himself a small, whimpering laugh, Cole slid the Jumping Sword from its sheath. Was there any chance of it working? He couldn't feel his power. Should he fight anyhow?

He was still on the ground, but it was clear that he wasn't fooling anybody. As the horsemen slowed and circled him, Cole stood up. The way the six were positioned, he could only see three of them at a time.

"Cole Randolph," one of the Enforcers said.

Cole faced him. "Maybe."

"It wasn't a question," the rider responded. "Lay down your sword."

Cole pointed the blade at the ground between and beyond two of the horsemen. "Away," he said. There was no tug. He sensed no connection to his power.

"This is your final warning," the spokesman called, drawing a longsword.

Cole stood his ground. Where was his ability? It was buried somewhere inside of him. Cole searched desperately, willing himself to feel something, but came up empty.

Power or no power, if they wanted him, they would have to take him. He would dodge and slash at men and horses for as long as he could. In his gut he knew there was no way he would win. He probably wouldn't harm any of them, and the chances were decent he would get killed instead of captured. Still, after all he had been through, and knowing the horrors that captivity would mean, he couldn't just give up.

"Who do you think you serve?" Cole cried.

The Enforcer hesitated, as if trying to discover the trick in the question. "The High King, of course," he finally said.

"Your orders didn't come from Owandell?" Cole asked.

"Naturally, since he leads the Enforcers, under the direction of the High King," the spokesman said.

"I am a servant of the High King," Cole said. It was at least partially true. The High King had asked him for favors when they last spoke. "Stafford Pemberton does not want me captured. The person who wants me is Nazeem, Owandell's real master. Nazeem taught Owandell shapecraft." If he was going down, Cole figured he could at least start some rumors that Owandell and Nazeem would rather keep unspoken.

The Enforcers were looking at one another. Did some of them know that Cole spoke the truth? Any of the experienced shapecrafters probably did. Had some of them heard similar rumors? Nazeem seemed more known in Necronum than elsewhere. Many echoes were clearly aware of him.

"Enough stalling," the spokesman barked. "Take him."

Cole heard pounding hoofs and a piercing whinny. All heads turned toward the oncoming sound. A riderless horse was closing on the group, its dark coat and mane aflame with flickering red highlights. The horse jumped over one of the mounts surrounding Cole, smashing an Enforcer from his saddle in the process. The horse landed smoothly and kept running.

The other horses began to stamp and rear. None of them were nearly as large as the newcomer. The new horse ran wild, leaping and bucking, crashing into the lesser horses and sending their riders flying.

The Enforcers had no answer to the sudden assault. A pair of them who had fallen to the ground were promptly trampled by the fierce horse. Cole held his sword ready, prepared to jump out of the way when the wild horse turned on him, but the crazed steed paid him no mind.

Though the rampaging horse appeared out of control, it soon became clear that it was targeting the Enforcers. Moving like a rodeo cowboy's worst nightmare, the huge

steed kicked horse and rider alike, ruthlessly stomping the Enforcers when they flopped to the ground.

Within less than a minute, the wild horse galloped off into the night, spewing clods of soil. Six Enforcers lay motionless, along with two of their horses. The other four mounts cantered away, empty stirrups flapping.

Cole sheathed his sword as Hunter ran up to him.

“How’d you do that?” Cole asked.

“Wasn’t me,” Hunter said, surveying the fallen riders. “I could hardly believe my eyes.”

Stunned and relieved, Cole found himself laughing. “It was like a tornado.”

Hunter laughed too.

Cole walked over to a fallen Enforcer, taking in the dented armor. “No way did that just happen. I was doomed. Do horses get rabies?”

“That wasn’t rabies,” Hunter said seriously. “That horse was an assassin. I had a great view. It couldn’t have taken out those Enforcers more efficiently. And then it stormed off.”

“Where’d it come from?” Cole asked.

Hunter rubbed his chin. “Some echoes can influence animals. Maybe the echo you’re working with guided it. If so, he’s really powerful.”

Cole held up the silver ringer. He still sensed no communication. “That makes more sense than some random horse protecting me.”

Hunter laughed again. “Those Enforcers had no clue what to do. It caught them totally flat-footed. Not one of them even tried to use their weapons. I can hardly blame them.”

“What now?” Cole asked.

“Enforcers tend to work in isolated units,” Hunter said. “I doubt they involved legionnaires or guardsmen. I scattered the echoes that were trailing us. The short-term threat might be over. Finding Dalton and the others in the dark will be tricky, especially since they’re on the run. Let’s get farther from the inn. Tomorrow, we’ll buy horses and make our way to Rincomere. The others can catch up with us there. I think all the Enforcers followed us.”

They started trotting away from the fallen Enforcers.

“Did the horse look weird to you?” Cole asked.

“While it pummeled those Enforcers to death?”

“Almost fiery,” Cole said.

“I noticed. Kind of like fire reflecting off smoke.”

Cole nodded at the perfect description. "Yeah."

"The reddish moon is up. Just a trick of the moonlight."

"The other horses had dark coats. But they didn't look like that."

"No," Hunter agreed pensively. "They didn't."

## CHAPTER

# 6

## CAVE

Cole and Hunter found Joe and Mira lounging near a well in the town square of Rincomere. Joe stood and waved as they rode up to them.

“What took you so long?” Mira asked.

“We had to kill six Enforcers,” Hunter said, dismounting.

“You’re not serious,” Joe checked.

“There’s a story to it,” Hunter said. “We’ll fill you in later.”

Fewer than a hundred buildings formed the village of Rincomere, most of a modest size, with walls of gray stone and roofs of dark shingles. All could have been designed and built by the same team. Every structure looked like it had stood for a long time. Cole noticed swallows flying in and out of muddy nests clustered under many of the eaves.

Weathered flagstones paved the few streets in town and covered the entirety of the square. The whole village had a sleepy feel. Cole had seen a few women sweeping porches and a couple of men leading mules. The square around the well was vacant except for a few scrawny kids playing marbles in one corner.

“No sign of Dalton?” Cole asked.

“Not yet,” Mira said. “We got here last night.”

“I expected to be first,” Joe said. “We swiped a pair of horses from a farm just south of the crossroads. We left more than their value.”

“We bought ours the morning after we escaped,” Cole said. “No trouble since then.”

“When in doubt, steal horses and ride hard,” Joe said. “The Outskirts has taught me that much. There are worse lessons to learn, I guess. Rincomere is quiet. A bunch of old folks hang around the two inns. A big ranch just outside of town breeds mules. There is some farming and some shepherders in the hills to the east.”

Hunter handed his reins to Joe and sat down by the well. Cole swung down from his horse as well, keeping the reins in his hand. Hunter bowed his head and pressed his knuckles together. After a moment he looked up.

“Lots of echoes,” Hunter said. “I didn’t feel special attention from any of them. They’re regulars, I think. Feels like this town has been here for a long time. I’ll shield our conversation just to be safe.”

“We learned the way to the cave,” Mira said. “We just follow a trail outside of town. I think Cole should go inside.”

“Won’t your sister’s imprint be more likely to talk to you?” Cole replied.

“Joe and I talked about it,” Mira said. “If I go in, I leave behind proof I was here. That doesn’t make sense if we can avoid it. Same with proof of Hunter. We need somebody who can win Destiny’s trust and who will leave behind a smart imprint that won’t blow our secrets. Joe would do well, but I worry about Destiny trusting a strange adult. She’s always been more open to young people. Cole, I think you’ve proven yourself more reliable than Jace and Dalton for this sort of mission. Jace is brave but not always careful. Dalton hasn’t been tested enough.”

“I’m pretty great,” Cole said, unable to resist a grin. “I get why you would pick me over those wannabes. But don’t forget that Nazeem is after me too. An imprint of me could heat up the hunt.”

“We thought about that,” Joe said. “After your interactions at the Seven-Cornered Shrine, your cover might already be blown. We heard all the Enforcers turn north, the way you went.”

“Not only that,” Hunter added. “They went straight to him. There must have been a perceptible with them. I don’t know exactly how the secret got out, but they were after Cole.”

“How’d you get away?” Mira asked.

“A wild horse came and killed them all,” Cole said.

Joe and Mira exchanged a look.

“Six Enforcers?” Joe verified.

“And two of their mounts,” Hunter said.

“A horse did that?” Mira asked. “Working alone?”

“It came galloping out of the night,” Cole said. “It went on a rampage and then ran off.”

“My best guess is an echo controlled the animal,” Hunter said. “Maybe the echo that bargained with Cole.”

“That would be one powerful echo,” Mira said.



“It’s a guess,” Cole said. “All we know for sure is it happened. We hadn’t seen the horse before, and we haven’t seen it since.”

“Somebody is on our side,” Mira said. “Cole’s echo gave us a key tip. The warning got us out of there.”

Cole slid his hand into the pocket with the ringer. “It sure seemed like the echo meant to help, whether or not he controlled the horse.”

“So will you go?” Mira asked. “Into the Cave of Memory, I mean?”

“If that’s what you want,” Cole said, not overly excited at a chance to let everyone down. “Are there any secrets that could help get Destiny to trust me?”

Mira beckoned Cole close with her finger. He drew near, pulling his horse as well, until Hunter relieved him of the reins.

Mira whispered, “Tell her about speaking to our mother and knowing that she marks us with stars. Only the most trusted people know about that. Tell her the haystacks have fallen down. That’s the master code phrase for identifying a messenger from Mother. Also tell her I’m with you. Mention that I needed to avoid making an imprint. But tell about the time she wet the bed and I threw her underthings and sheets out the window to help her hide it. That didn’t work, by the way. She was four, I was six. Remind her of the time her tooth fell out, and she lost it and was sad because she couldn’t put it under the pillow for the Toothmonger. I found a little pebble that looked almost like a tooth on the white gravel path in the East Garden. I told her the Toothmonger would accept it. She used it and still got some ringers the next morning.”

“Our Toothmonger is called the Tooth Fairy,” Cole explained quietly.

“Ours is a hairy demon,” Mira whispered. “Yours sounds nicer.”

“Ours brings money too,” Cole explained. “Same result. Any other secrets or memories?”

“Tessa liked when I sang to her,” Mira said, her voice catching. “She was my only little sister. The one I cared for. She could be freaky. She would sometimes say things that sounded way too adult. Or even beyond adult. Mysterious prophecies wrapped up in riddles. She was kind of like a perceptive, but more than that. She said things that she had no business knowing. But then a lot of the time she was just a small girl. My little sister. I sang songs about talking flowers. She loved flowers.” A tear slid down Mira’s cheek.

“I’ll find her,” Cole assured her.

“Please,” Mira said, nodding and then wiping her eyes. “I don’t know if I can handle losing her.” She squeezed her eyes shut, but more tears spilled out.

Cole hugged her. "It's okay. Her imprint is just the start. We'll find *her*."

As Mira clung to him, Cole felt his resolve strengthening. Mira had been through a lot. Her little sister obviously held a special place in her heart. There were a lot of things Cole hoped to accomplish, including finding Jenna and getting home, but right now this was the most urgent problem. They had helped two of the other sisters. He wouldn't blow it with this one.

"Stop traumatizing Mira," Hunter scolded.

Cole realized that Hunter and Joe couldn't hear their whispered conversation. "She's telling me about Destiny," Cole explained. "I have a way with the ladies."

Mira pushed Cole away and wiped her eyes again. "I'm sorry," she said, glancing at Cole and the others. "I don't know what came over me."

"Don't apologize," Joe said. "You're under so much stress."

Mira shook her head. "I can't afford to crack up. Weakness doesn't help anybody."

"You're tired," Joe consoled. "We've been riding hard."

"There is plenty more travel ahead of us," Mira said, looking more or less composed again. "I'm not comfortable sitting still. It's early. Maybe Cole and I can go ahead to the cave? Then Joe and Hunter can catch up after Dalton and Jace get here."

"Be sure to tell Jace that Mira chose me for cave duty," Cole said. "So he'll get why we didn't wait."

"Better yet," Joe said to Mira, "Hunter and Cole can visit the cave while you and I keep watch for the others. Maybe you can sneak in some rest."

"But I should be there," Mira said.

"Sitting outside a cave alone?" Joe asked. "Not on my watch. You're too valuable."

Mira stared at him.

"What?" Joe finally asked.

"I'm trying to decide whether you mean valuable or incompetent," Mira said.

"The revolution depends on you girls," Joe said. "The Unseen tasked me with keeping you safe. I'm doing my best."

Mira gave a single nod. "Cole? Hunter? You up for it?"

"It would be a shame to waste the day," Hunter said.

Cole mustered his most confident tone. "Let's go caving."

\* \* \*

The nondescript cave opening looked like a little cleft in the rocks that probably went back no more than fifteen feet. Given the reputation of the Cave of Memory, Cole had

pictured something more grand—yawning darkness fanged with stalactites.

“Think that’s it?” Cole asked.

“Joe pointed out the trail and told us to go left at the fork,” Hunter said. “Looks like the trail ends here.”

The leather saddle shifted slightly and creaked as Cole dismounted. The ride from Rincomere had only taken a couple of hours. Staring at the unassuming gap in the mountainside, Cole patted his horse.

A sound from a stand of trees off to one side made Cole turn abruptly. He could make out a vague shape in the trees.

Nudging his horse to a trot, Hunter rode that way. “It’s a horse,” he soon called. “Wait. Two horses. I don’t see riders. They must be in the cave.”

“Enforcers?” Cole asked.

“Doesn’t look like their kind of mounts,” Hunter replied, turning his horse to ride back to Cole.

“Great,” Cole said. “I’ll have actual people to worry about in there as well.”

“It’s a little surprising,” Hunter said, swinging down from his horse.

“Why? Don’t lots of people know about the cave?”

“Sure, but they stay away because of the curse.”

Cole stared at his brother. “Now I hear about a curse?”

Hunter shrugged. “You already know the basics. Whoever goes in leaves an imprint. Think about the downside. People can figure out you went there. By speaking with your imprint, strangers can find out about you and potentially use the info against you. And bad people have gone inside. You can meet some serious evil in the Cave of Memory. Most people in Necronum have decided the place is bad luck.”

“But nobody can touch me,” Cole checked.

“Not physically,” Hunter said. “You won’t get punched or stabbed, unless real people do it. But bad imprints could mess with your head. Watch out.”

Cole took a deep breath. Except for meeting live people inside, Cole had thought through these dangers. “I might as well get going.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Hunter said.

Shielding his eyes, Cole glanced toward the sun. It wasn’t high enough to be noon yet.

Leaving his horse with Hunter, Cole walked to the gap in the rocks. Cool air wafted out. He had to crouch a little to proceed. The way curved, narrowing somewhat, and looked like it probably stopped just out of sight. But as he crept forward, the opposite happened. The tunnel widened, opening into a vast chamber,

the air cool enough that Cole wished he had a jacket. Cole could see where four different tunnels branched out from the large chamber, each lit by a different color—red, blue, green, and purple.

A woman stood on the near side of the chamber. She was heavysset and in her fifties, with short black hair and a long brown fur coat. She held up a hand. “Halt. Do you know where you are?”

“The Cave of Memory,” Cole said, holding still.

The woman gave a nod. “All who enter leave behind a permanent impression of themselves. If you come any farther, you will do the same when you leave.”

“I know,” Cole said.

“Proceed if you wish,” the woman said. “You’ve been warned.”

Cole walked over to her. “Who are you?”

She ducked her head and held up both hands. “Not your business. I came here by accident. So I warn people who enter. I spare the unwary from surprises.”

“You’re an imprint,” Cole said.

“You’ve already come too far,” she said. “You’ll leave one too.”

“Do you mind it here?” Cole wondered.

The woman folded her arms and looked a little puzzled. “Honestly? I got more than I bargained for when I came in. But I can’t say I’m suffering.”

“Don’t you get bored?” Cole asked.

She scrunched her eyebrows. “Funny—I can’t recall. I guess that means I don’t. I remember coming here with my husband and exploring for a good while. Once we went to exit the cave, it gets fuzzy.” She looked around, peering toward the colored passages. “My husband isn’t with me. I suppose he wandered off. Not sure how long ago. He always had wanderlust. It was why we stumbled across the cave in the first place.”

“How long ago?”

She looked perplexed. “Feels like it’s been a while. Maybe not? Time gets funny in here. We learned that we had found the Cave of Memory from some of the imprints while we were still tangible. It was strange to meet the imprints. Watch out. Some aren’t all there, if you take my meaning.” She pointed a finger at the side of her head and twirled it in little circles.

“Do you miss your husband?” Cole wondered.

She peered around the area again. “I expect I will if he doesn’t turn up soon.”

“Do many people come into the cave?” Cole tried.

She stared upward in thought. “Hard to say. Not since I’ve been here at any rate.”

“Are there two other people in here right now?” Cole asked.

“That doesn’t ring true,” she said.

“There were two horses outside,” Cole explained.

She shrugged. “Could be I missed them. Doesn’t seem likely, though. Looking back, it gets muddy since I exited the cave.”

Cole remembered Sando explaining that the imprints didn’t learn anything new after they were made. How long had this imprint been here? Years, maybe. Or days. Or centuries. If she couldn’t remember, it all might feel the same to her.

Cole gestured toward the colorfully glowing passages. “I didn’t think of bringing a light.”

“You’ll find enough in the cave,” she said. “There are some dark places, to be sure, but never for too long. At least in my experience. This is an enchanted place. Strong weaving. Dates back to near the founding of the Outskirts, so I’m told.”

“What if I’m looking for somebody?” Cole asked.

“Could take some time,” she said. “The cave goes and goes.”

“Any tips to keep me from getting lost?” Cole asked. “Do the colors help?”

“We never made complete sense of the colors,” the woman said. “We got ourselves good and lost, but an imprint gave us the tip that heading down would generally lead us farther in while trending up would lead us out. Not always true in a cave. But true in this one. It’s how we found our way back to the entrance.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Cole said. He felt like he should get moving. “You stay here all the time?”

The woman shrugged. “It’s good to have a purpose.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Cole said. He glanced over at the colored tunnels. “Any thoughts which I should try first?”

“Far as I could tell, they all lead somewhere.”

Cole headed for the passage with the red glow, since the color made it seem warmer. After walking out of sight from the woman, he paused. How long before she would forget meeting him?

He counted to ten in his head, then returned to her.

“What have we here?” she asked, sizing him up. “An imprint, I take it?”

“I’m a person,” Cole said. “I just came in. We spoke a short time ago.”

The woman broke eye contact and stared at the cave floor. “Did we?” she asked with an embarrassed smile. “Funny how the mind works in here.” She gazed at him suspiciously. “I don’t recall you.”

“It’s okay,” Cole said, backing away. “I have one of those faces. Very, um,

forgettable.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you pulling my leg? Did we really speak?”

“Sorry,” Cole said, not wanting to upset her. “Maybe I’m mistaken.”

“Some of you are devils,” she replied huffily. “Not fair to play with a person’s mind. Not when they’re alone in a cave.”

“Again, sorry,” Cole said, returning to the red tunnel and passing out of view. The ground sloped slightly down ahead of him.

Cole took comfort that the woman wouldn’t be confused for long. She would forget him all over again. He tried to imagine how it would feel to forget everything after it happened. Life would be disorienting. Then again, having no sense for how long he had been there would be merciful if he was stuck in a cave forever.

Cole glanced back. Should he be marking his way? Should he have brought more provisions than a water flask? Maybe some rope. He might not need food if he was quick. If his mission took too long, he could always go back and resupply. And if the woman’s trick to find the entrance failed, he could probably get directions from imprints. Determined to find Destiny sooner rather than later, Cole quickened his pace.

## CHAPTER

# 7

## MEMORIES

Cole considered some of the benefits of the imprints making no new memories. For one thing, it meant that his conversations would be forgotten. His inquiries would leave no tracks, and if an interaction went badly, he could go away, come back, and have another try.

That meant he was free to ask for help from any imprints he met. None of them would remember any tips they shared. Only the imprint Cole left behind would know about the imprints he met and the conversations they had. Knowing a version of himself would remain behind, Cole resolved that once he became that imprint, he would keep silent to anyone who tried to pry any information from him. When the time came, he would find a secluded corner of the cave and slip into blissful forgetfulness.

Many of the people who entered the Cave of Memory with important information would probably do likewise. They would want to limit the interactions their imprints had with others. He would have to check all the nooks and crannies and follow tunnels to the end.

One big problem was the other live people.

There were almost certainly at least two other humans in the cave. Maybe more—not everyone had to arrive on horseback.

If not for the other people, Cole realized he could shamelessly roam the cave calling out to Destiny. The imprints who heard him would forget before long, and any who might help him would be drawn to him. It could really speed up the search.

Of course, if she was trying to hide, calling to Destiny might drive her away. He had a feeling that whatever tactics he tried, finding her was going to be a chore.

The cavern widened into a long chamber with several branching passages, each lit by a different color, this time orange, green, yellow, white, and blue. The chamber itself was illuminated by the light spilling from the various tunnels. At the far end of

the chamber, a man sat on a rock. His black hair was slicked back, forming a slight widow's peak, and a dark, narrow beard followed the lines of his jaw and surrounded his mouth. He had rings on his fingers and elaborate clothes covered by a rich cape. Cole thought he looked like a professional hypnotist.

"Welcome," the man said, as if he owned the place, his voice a resonant baritone.

"Hi," Cole replied.

"You have come seeking my knowledge," the man declared.

"I don't think so," Cole said, drawing closer.

"You know who I am."

"No."

The man's small smile hinted that he doubted Cole but also suggested he was willing to play along. "Then allow me to introduce myself. I am Harvan Kane."

He seemed to be waiting for a reaction.

"I'm Cole."

Harvan gave Cole a shrewd look accompanied by a slow nod. "This is not our first conversation."

"It is," Cole said.

"Then why didn't you shake my hand to check if I'm an imprint?"

"I didn't want to be impolite."

"Nice save," Harvan said, extending a hand.

Cole waved his hand through Harvan's. He felt nothing.

Harvan flashed a wide grin. "I know how this works, Cole. You can talk to me, then walk away and return with a new tactic. I can't form new memories. At least not beyond a single conversation. You've failed with me before. Probably a lot. This time you're playing the role of the one person in Necronum who doesn't know my name."

"I've really never heard of you," Cole assured him.

"Let me save you some time. There are obvious things I must keep hidden, but I am willing to reveal some mysteries." He looked around the stony chamber. "You may have noticed I'm not exactly hiding."

"True." Now that they were talking, Harvan seemed less like a professional hypnotist and more like a guy on an infomercial who was trying to appear successful. "I kind of need to keep moving."

Harvan considered him carefully. "You're good. Who sent you?"

"Nobody."

Harvan laughed knowingly. "Nice try. I find that highly improbable. Why would a child come to the Cave of Memory on his own? However . . . those who are after



what I know would absolutely hire a kid to deceive me. They would stop at nothing.”

“I’m looking for somebody else,” Cole said, taking a step away from Harvan.

“Answer quickly,” Harvan challenged. “Who is the Grand Shaper of Necronum?”

Cole paused. “I’m not sure. I haven’t asked.”

Harvan wagged a scolding finger and smiled. “Not too quick on your feet that time.”

“I really don’t know,” Cole said. “I’m new here.”

“You want me disoriented,” Harvan said. “You don’t want me to know the year.”

“I’m from outside the Outskirts.”

“What world?” Harvan asked quickly.

“Earth.”

“What country?”

“The United States.”

“What state?”

“Arizona.”

“The territory?”

“It’s a state now.”

“What’s your favorite food back home?”

“Hamburgers, I guess.”

“Never heard of them.”

“Ground beef on bread.”

“Sounds like pig.”

“You’ve been here a while.”

Thick rings glinting, Harvan steepled his fingers. “Who is the current High Shaper?”

“Stafford Pemberton.”

Harvan squinted suspiciously. “Never heard of him. How long has he been in office?”

“At least sixty years,” Cole said. “Maybe quite a bit more than that. He ages slowly.”

“What year is it?”

Cole hesitated. “I don’t know,” he said, mildly surprised that it was true. “It never comes up.”

“Sounds like I may have been here for longer than I realized,” Harvan said.

“Could be,” Cole said. “Especially if you can’t make new memories.”

Realization dawned on Harvan’s face. “You’re counting on that. I can’t trust a

word you say. You're trying to play me. You're no Outsider. You created a false identity through research. Arizona was a nice touch. You must have heard of my interest in the Outside. And you've clearly fabricated an imaginary High Shaper to convince me that I've been here for ages, so I'll let my guard down. Bring better deceptions next time, pup. Or better yet, don't try again. Nobody outfoxes Harvan Kane."

Cole gave no reply. The conversation was going nowhere. He needed to keep moving. Was it rude to walk away from somebody who wasn't really a person? No, right? Especially when the nonperson wouldn't even remember.

"I see I struck a nerve," Harvan gloated. "Better luck next time, young pup. Word of advice—just deal plainly. You won't get anywhere with me using guile."

Cole felt tempted to explain that he wasn't defeated, just sick of wasting time, but stopped himself. He needed to avoid wasting words with every imprint he met or finding Destiny would take days. Maybe weeks.

Cole made his way deeper into the cave. He soon became disoriented among the many forking corridors. The woman at the entrance had noticed no pattern in the colors of the tunnels, and neither did Cole. He supposed if he wrote down the color of each tunnel he took, he could use the colors to find his way back, but he had brought nothing to write with, and he soon became thoroughly lost.

The farther he went, the wetter the cave became. Stalactites dripped onto stalagmites or into puddles, and flowing formations of stone glimmered damply. Clusters of fragile white crystals decorated some areas of the cave, as did groupings of delicate stalactites as thin as soda straws.

Cole met many imprints. A few ran from him. He shook hands with the others, never feeling them. At first he kept his conversations short. There were certain patterns. Whether the person came across as creepy or nice, they were all confused about how long they had been there, and most seemed to be hiding something.

Before long Cole stopped talking to any of them—he just checked to make sure they weren't tangible. There were too many imprints, and he had too much ground to cover. Though the ages varied, he only encountered adults. He needed a nine-year-old girl.

While Cole knelt beside a pool in a roomy chamber with several natural stone columns, a man approached, perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties. Cole filled his cupped hands with cool water. It tasted gritty with minerals. Cole shook a hand dry and held it out. The man offered his hand, and Cole swiped through it.

"You're young to visit the cave alone," the man commented.

Cole had already learned that if you didn't want to get stuck in a conversation with an imprint, you had to keep moving. But the water was refreshing, so he scooped up some more, then paused with it on the way to his lips.

He was really looking at the man for the first time. He was well-dressed and startlingly familiar.

The man seemed perplexed by the staring. "Hello? Are you going to answer?"

It took Cole a moment to place him. The only other times he had seen this person, he had looked much older.

"Stafford Pemberton?" Cole asked.

The man grinned. "You know of me? It must not have been too long since I entered the cave."

"Kind of long," Cole said. "You're older now. And you've lived a long time."

"Have I?" Stafford asked cheerfully. "Can't say I'm sorry to hear that. What exactly am I doing after living for so long?"

The Stafford before him was young enough that he might not yet know what the future held for him. How old had Stafford been when he married Harmony to become king? "You're the High Shaper," Cole said. "And the High King."

"No," Stafford said, flushing. "She said yes? It worked out?"

"You're married to Queen Harmony," Cole said.

Stafford closed his eyes and raised his fists. "Yes!" he exulted. He seemed a lot friendlier and more carefree than the beleaguered king Cole had met. Stafford opened his eyes. "How long have I ruled?"

"Over sixty years," Cole said.

"And I'm a powerful shaper?" he asked hopefully.

"Probably the most powerful," Cole said. "At least you were."

Stafford furrowed his brow. "I was?"

"It's a long story," Cole said.

"Tell me."

"You'll just forget," Cole said.

"I came here with grand aspirations," Stafford said. "This construct of me is stuck here forever. It would be a mercy to know, if only for a moment."

Cole rose from the edge of the pool. He didn't want to list the terrible things the High King had done. This version of Stafford had no daughters yet and seemed nice. "A shapemaker helped you increase your powers."

"Who?"

"Owandell."

Stafford scowled. "How do you know that name?"

"You already know him?"

"He is very secretive. Things are different in the future?"

"You could say that," Cole said. "If he played this right, maybe he could get information about Stafford's past. "He works for you. Kind of."

"Kind of?"

Cole tried to phrase his explanation carefully. "Owandell turned on you. He helped you for a long time, but he was secretly working against you. He works for Nazeem."

"I don't know that name," Stafford said.

"He's an evil guy imprisoned somewhere in Necronum," Cole said. "He taught Owandell shapcraft. Nazeem was a big secret. Only now are people learning about him."

"How do you know so much?" Stafford asked, a faint suspicion in his tone.

"I worked for you," Cole said. "I was one of the royal errand boys. But now I'm here to help your daughters."

Stafford grinned with delighted astonishment. "I have daughters? With Harmony? How many?"

"Five," Cole said.

"And sons?"

"None."

Stafford's face fell. "That's a blow. Is there still a chance?"

"I don't think so," Cole said. "But your daughters are amazing."

"They need help?" Stafford asked.

"Owandell stole their shaping powers," Cole said. "They're on the run from him."

"Running from Owandell?" Stafford blustered. "But I'm High Shaper! What am I doing?"

"Owandell got powerful," Cole said. "He runs a lot of your military. The politics are complicated."

"One of my daughters is here?" Stafford asked. "In the cave?"

"The youngest came here," Cole said. "I'm with some people trying to find and rescue her, including one of your other daughters."

"Incredible," Stafford muttered. He gazed at Cole with real suspicion. "How do I know you're not working for Owandell? Or some other enemy?"

Cole thought for a moment. "I guess I can't prove that. But I'm not. Why are you here?"

“No big mystery since you already know about Owandell,” Stafford said. “He sent me here to talk to some people. I need to improve my powers if I’m to win Harmony.”

“You talked to them?”

Stafford nodded. “I guess their advice worked if I end up with Harmony.” He grinned. “I can hardly believe it. I mean, I have ambitions, and connections, but Harmony is such a long shot. I’m not in a strong position to win the most eligible maiden in the five kingdoms.”

His genuine excitement made Cole sad. “Is it about the power?”

“I mean, sure, it would change everything for me,” Stafford agreed. “But she’s the bigger prize. You’ve seen her, I take it. She has it all.”

Cole thought of Stafford and Harmony living in separate towers, quietly warring against each other. He reflected on Stafford stealing his daughters’ shaping abilities. The Stafford he was talking to didn’t act like he would do those things. And maybe he wouldn’t at this point. He must have changed.

“What’s wrong?” Stafford asked. “Does something happen to her?”

“Harmony is all right,” Cole said. “I was just thinking about your daughters. Does Owandell have any weaknesses you know about?”

“I know very little about him,” Stafford said. “He is competent and secretive. He has delivered on his promises to me so far. And apparently, he will deliver on the outrageous ones, though I wish I could have known he would betray me.”

“I can’t help there,” Cole apologized. “It’s already in the past.” He stooped and scooped up another handful of water, bringing the fluid to his lips.

“Hey!” a voice called.

Cole turned to see a young man and young woman emerging from a passage into the chamber. The young woman held a small lantern. The young man had spoken and was pointing at Cole.

“Imprints can’t hold water,” the young man said. “You’re a person. We didn’t expect to see anybody else in here.”

“Yeah,” Cole said, since he had been caught wet-handed. “You’re people too?”

“We sure are,” the young man verified. He glanced at Stafford. “Is that your brother?”

The couple looked nice. Their clothes weren’t fancy, but they were clean. The young woman had a fresh face, and the young man seemed friendly. Hopefully, they weren’t murderers or servants of Nazeem.

“He’s an imprint,” Cole said.

The young man came forward and shook hands with Cole. The young woman as well. They passed their hands through Stafford's.

"You've got guts," the young man told Cole. "A kid coming in here alone."

Cole detected no threat in the statement. "I'm trying to help a friend."

"We wish you luck," the young man said, glancing at the young woman. "Today has been lucky for us."

"Really?" Cole asked.

"Tell him," the young woman said.

"It's kind of a secret," the young man muttered, lowering his voice but not enough to go unheard.

"Oh, tell him," she said.

The young man smiled. "It's a surprise to find anyone here. Not many people brave the caves. But our family has a tradition. My great-great-great-grandfather left an imprint in here. When any of his grandkids choose a spouse, we bring them to meet him. The route is all mapped out."

"If he agrees, you're in," the young woman said. "If not, you're out."

"Sounds like you're in," Cole said.

"He loved her," the young man gushed. "Then again, he's only turned down five candidates since the tradition began."

"Well, that makes me feel special," the young woman said. "At least I'm not one of the five worst."

The young man rolled his eyes. "He was really taken by you. Probably more than any of the others."

She gave him a playful shove. "Now you're laying it on thick."

"I'm serious," he said.

Cole was glad they acted so happy. And unthreatening. "Would you have called it off if he hadn't liked her?" Cole wondered.

"Yeah?" the young woman asked, interested by the question. "Would you have ditched me by the roadside?"

"I knew he would like her," the young man hedged. "Who wouldn't?"

"Good answer," the young woman said. She looked at Cole. "But if Pappy had been against it, we probably wouldn't go through with it. Of the five Pappy didn't like, two went ahead and tied the knot anyhow. Both marriages didn't work out."

"Now everybody is sure Pappy is a prophet," the young man said. "Or at least has sharp judgment. But no worries here. The old guy knows a good thing when he sees it."

“Congrats,” Cole said. “I noticed some horses when I came in. Yours?”

The young woman swatted the young man. “I told you people could see them!”

“Off in the trees?” the young man asked.

“Right,” Cole said.

“Those are ours,” the young man said.

“You may see my friend when you exit,” Cole said. “Could you tell him I’m all right?”

“No problem,” the young man said, walking toward another passage. “Good luck.”

“You didn’t happen to see a girl?” Cole asked. “An imprint. Kind of young? Like nine?”

The young man frowned. “No kids. Sorry.”

“We saw some weirdo who couldn’t stop laughing,” the young woman said. “He was skipping around. Didn’t need that in my mind.”

“Oh, and keep away if you see a guy wrapped in chains with a sack over his head,” the young man said. “My brother warned me.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Cole said, unable to resist a shiver.

The young man and young woman proceeded out of the room along a passage that sloped slightly upward. They kept talking to each other. The conversation became unintelligible as it faded into the distance.

“You are the first person I remember meeting in here,” Stafford said. “Now I’ve met three.”

“You remember them?” Cole asked.

“Sure, I can still hear them.”

“You’ll forget soon.”

“So I understand.”

“When I’m gone, you’ll be back to zero,” Cole said.

“I suppose so. And I’ll forget that I succeed with Harmony.”

Cole looked around the cavern. In one corner he saw a bunch of loose rocks and pebbles. He hustled over there and began arranging pebbles on the cave floor.

“I’m in a hurry,” Cole said. “But you were good luck. Now that I’ve met the other people in the cave, I’m going to risk calling to your daughter. It could save me a lot of time.”

“Not everybody who comes here necessarily leaves horses out front,” Stafford said.

“Right,” Cole said. “But I’m told not many people come here. I’m going to risk it.”

He worked in silence for a moment.

“What’s her name?” Stafford asked.

“Destiny,” Cole said.

“I name my daughter Destiny?” Stafford asked, not delighted.

“Harmony chose it,” Cole said.

“Sounds like I’m going to be a pushover,” Stafford said.

“You’ll hold your own.”

Stafford leaned forward. “Let’s see. What are you writing? Oh! That’s very kind.”

Cole stepped back to survey his handiwork. Using pebbles, he had formed the message U GET HARMONY.

Folding his arms, Stafford stared at the pebbles. Tears shone in his eyes. “I’m not sure you know how much that means to me. I know I’m not . . . real, but, it will be a source of comfort and happiness.”

“Glad to do it,” Cole said. If only Stafford stayed like he was when he was young, the entire five kingdoms might be a different place. Cole would not have been in a hurry to do the older version of the king any favors. In fact, he might have written *U DIE POOR AND UNLOVED*. This Stafford was a different story.

“You know, I come from a noble house,” Stafford said. “We’re not as ancient or renowned as some, but we have a saying used to reward good service. Tell any member of my household, ‘A radiant deed shines forever,’ and see what they do for you.”

“What if I tell you?” Cole asked.

“All the better,” Stafford said. “You’ll get a reward that would astound any errand boy. And be assured, it would impress more than errand boys.”

“Thanks,” Cole said.

“No. Thank *you*. Take good care of my daughter.”

“I’ll do my best,” Cole said. *To protect her from you*, he added silently as he turned and walked away.



## CHAPTER

# 8

## IMPRINT

**B**y some Miracle, I was sent to look for my Destiny!” Cole called again. His voice was getting hoarse. He had used that same shout hundreds, maybe thousands of times over the past hours.

Since he had started yelling, he saw fewer imprints. Undoubtedly, many were avoiding him. He sometimes glimpsed figures fleeing down distant tunnels.

Cole continued to test the imprints that came close enough, to be sure they weren't actual people. But he spoke to few, and kept the interactions short, in an attempt to cover as much ground as possible.

As he trudged deeper into the cave, he increasingly encountered dead ends. Each gave him a sense of hope—at least the subterranean labyrinth didn't go on forever.

To spare his voice, Cole began calling less loudly. His cry remained the same. “By some Miracle, I was sent to look for my Destiny.” Depending on his position in the cave, the last word would sometimes echo impressively. Cole figured the phrase was a little cryptic if a stranger overheard him, but it should be clear enough to make Tessa curious.

When a young voice finally responded, Cole was in a narrow passage with a dead end in sight. He always walked close enough to the dead end to make sure an unseen corridor didn't branch out. White deposits on one wall bristled with glittering crystals.

“You're not giving up,” said a young girl behind him.

Jumping and whirling, Cole found Tessa standing there, looking much as she had when Trillian the torivor sent Cole to a simulation of her castle during the trial to rescue Honor. Tessa looked a couple of years younger than Cole, with straight brown hair and dark, soulful eyes.

“Tessa?” Cole asked. “Destiny?”

“Tessa,” she said. “I’ve been following you.” Her expression was serious, her voice grave.

“For how long?”

The young girl shrugged. “Did Miracle really send you?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “I even have proof. The first is a code phrase. The haystacks have fallen down.”

“Honor knows you,” Tessa said. “She thinks I can trust you.”

“Honor is here?”

“Her imprint,” Tessa said. “She’s making sure nobody bothers us.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “You would have come here before Honor. How can you remember her?”

Tessa glanced over her shoulder. “I can still see her against the wall down there.”

“Where?”

“On the left.”

“Oh. Yeah, I kind of see her.”

“If she passes out of my notice, I forget she’s here,” Tessa said. “Or so she tells me.” Tessa held out a hand. “Don’t you want to test me?”

Cole passed his hand through hers. “My job would be a lot easier if this was really you.”

“Sorry. We’re only imprints. Is Mira okay?”

“She’s on the run but doing all right.”

“What does she want?”

“We’re looking for you and Honor. We’re trying to help. Your mom put stars in the sky. You’re in big trouble.”

“I’m not surprised,” Tessa said, shuffling her feet, eyes downcast. “Somebody is after me. Maybe he finally caught me.”

“Who is after you?”

“A powerful echo. I don’t know his name.”

“Nazeem,” Cole said.

“Maybe.”

“Probably. He’s after me and Mira too.”

Honor gazed at him. “You don’t work for my father?”

“No,” Cole assured her.

“Or anyone who wishes me harm?”

“No.”

“You’re with Mira and you’re trying to help me?”

“Yes.”

Tessa gave a small smile. “I can tell when people are lying. You’re not. At least I don’t think so. Can I trust myself as an imprint? I feel normal, but I can’t feel my power anymore. Not at all.”

“I’m here to help,” Cole said, and he meant it more than ever. Tessa was only two years his junior, but her small build, big eyes, and pretty face made her seem even younger. Anyone would want to protect her!

“Father is looking for me too,” Tessa said. “I have to be careful what I share. Even when people mean well, they could accidentally give away clues.” Tessa looked young, but like Mira, she hadn’t aged for more than sixty years. Though still a kid, she had a lot of experience living on the run.

“The real you is already in trouble,” Cole said. “You’ve probably been caught. We’re not just trying to find you—we’re trying to rescue you.”

“Mother sent a young boy to rescue me?” Tessa asked.

“We have an adult with us,” Cole explained, trying not to feel inadequate.

“Does that mean there are other kids?” Tessa wondered.

“Well, yeah, three others,” Cole said. “Four if you count Mira.”

“Who sends kids against soldiers and evil weavers?”

“We’re what Mira has,” Cole said for want of a better reason. “We rescued Honor and got her power back. Constance too.”

“You found Costa?” Surprised joy lit up her expression.

“And restored her power,” Cole said. Tessa’s excitement at the news helped him feel less defensive.

“All right, I’ll talk to you,” Tessa said. “Where do I begin? Tell Mira I’ve been all right. She always worries. After father took my weaving power, I didn’t feel like myself for years. I went around in a daze. You know the feeling when you forget something important you want to say? You just had it in mind, but then you can’t remember? I felt like that all the time. Something was missing.”

“That sounds terrible,” Cole said.

“Not too bad,” Tessa said. “I just felt . . . off. More annoying than terrible. Anyhow, a few years ago, I started feeling more like myself again. I began to get impulses about where to go and what to do. I started saying things that disturbed people.”

“Disturbed people?”

“I used to do it all the time,” Tessa said. “I didn’t stop to think about what the words meant. They just showed up. That stopped after father took my power.”

“Then your power started coming back,” Cole said. “It happened to your sisters too.”

Tessa puckered her lips off to one side. “I don’t feel it now. My power, I mean. Being an imprint. But it was coming back. And people were after us.”

“Us?”

“Me and Leo,” she said. “My bodyguard. He didn’t come in here with me. I hope he’s all right.”

“Why’d you come here?” Cole asked.

Tessa shrugged. “On a hunch. My hunches saved us a couple of times, so Leo was starting to trust them.”

“Where were you heading next?”

“That’s the big question,” Tessa said. “If you know where I went, you’ll run off to save me.”

“Is that so bad?”

“Not bad. I want to be saved. I just wish I could feel what would be best for you. And for Mira. And for me, too. The feelings were coming back to me. As an imprint, I don’t have the gift at all.”

“We’ll be careful,” Cole said.

“You’ll try,” Tessa said. “Honor tried too. She had some soldiers with her. If you’re here, Honor failed. If Honor couldn’t do it, what are Mira and some kids going to do?”

Cole remembered Desmond and Oster, knights from Blackmont Castle who had joined Honor in her quest to find Destiny. “We have to try,” Cole said. “We can get more help if we need it. Mira will never give up on you.”

“I know,” Tessa said. “But maybe she should.”

“Not going to happen,” Cole said. “We’ll just end up looking for you with less information. It’ll take longer. Mira will be in more danger.”

“I guess,” Tessa said reluctantly. “When I first arrived to this cave, I didn’t know what I was looking for. That’s how it always used to work. I said what I felt, did what I felt, and interesting things would follow. Back home at the castle, I was never in danger, but people around me always told me how what I said or did changed their lives. Sometimes it was good. Saved their marriage. Helped their business. Cured their cat.”

“You cured cats?” Cole asked.

“I shared some recipes,” Tessa said. “Just don’t ask me to remember them. The words spilled out. I didn’t know how people would take them.”

“Your mom has a gift like that,” Cole said. “Knowing things.”

“We had some things in common,” Tessa said. “But hers was different from mine. Nobody was like me. My gift is . . . weird. Poor Mother.”

“Why?”

“I would always say the most dreadful things to her.”

“Like what?”

Tessa rolled her eyes and extended her arms like a sleepwalker, then spoke in haunted tones. “You will lose everything you love most. Enemies plot behind every door. Your joy will turn to ashes, your peace to turmoil, your dreams to ruins.” She lowered her arms, and her voice returned to normal. “I was fun at parties.”

“Those words just came?”

“I couldn’t resist,” Tessa said. “Mother loved me, I think, but she didn’t like speaking to me. She started avoiding me.”

“What you told her kind of came true,” Cole said.

“Doesn’t make me fun to be around. Who wants bad news? Not many people liked speaking to me.”

“What about the people you helped?”

“I like to think about them. But my messages didn’t always help. What if some girl started telling secrets from your past that could destroy your career? I got people arrested. I ended friendships. I could be scary. What if I explained how your cousin felt when he drowned, though you didn’t know what I meant at the time and it didn’t happen until the next day?”

“Freaky,” Cole said.

Tessa brightened. “Mira liked me, though. I never knew things about her. Words didn’t come when we were alone.”

“Never?”

“Not once.”

“Did you ever try?”

Tessa’s face grew serious. “I never tried. With anyone. I couldn’t stop the feelings or cause them.”

“Did you miss your feelings when they were gone?” Cole asked, wondering if it might have been a relief.

“I did,” Tessa said. “More than I would have guessed. I didn’t know how much my power guided me until it was gone. When my abilities started to come back, my life was more dangerous than before. The feelings have helped me.”

“What did you learn here?” Cole asked.

Tessa frowned. "Are you sure I should tell you? Mira is with you. My power doesn't work as an imprint. I have no feel for whether telling you will be good or not. It could be so dangerous."

"I told you: we're not going to stop looking for you," Cole said. "You might as well help us."

Tessa covered her eyes with both hands, as if trying to hide. "Have you heard of Gamat Rue?"

"No."

"The old prison? Abandoned centuries ago?"

"I'm new to Necronum."

Slightly lowering one hand, Tessa peeked at Cole. "Once, Gamat Rue held the worst criminals in Necronum. But people haven't used it for hundreds of years. An imprint here told me about an echo imprisoned there."

"It's a prison for echoes?"

"Not at first. But an evil echomancer took it over. The echolands side has lots of prisoners now. That's why it was abandoned."

"What's an echomancer?"

Tessa dropped both hands and stared. "For somebody who wants to save me, you sure don't know very much."

"So teach me."

"Echomancers are echoes with weaving powers," Tessa said. "Your shaping power doesn't usually cross with you into the echolands. Echomancers are the exceptions. The imprint told me the echomancer at Gamat Rue is named Nandavi."

"You needed to find Nandavi?"

"No, I went to find an echo named Ragio that Nandavi holds prisoner."

"You went to the prison?" Cole asked.

"Unless somebody stopped me," Tessa said. "That was my plan."

"How were you going to talk to an echo imprisoned in the echolands?" Cole asked.

"I wasn't sure," Tessa said. "Not exactly. People stay away from Gamat Rue. Not much is known about it. I'm no good at seeing the echolands. But Leo was coming with me, and he's a talented weaver. I hoped he would help me contact Ragio."

"What about Nandavi?"

"Nandavi." Tessa shivered. "I didn't want to meet her. I had no idea how much she could bother us from the echolands. But I'm looking for my shaping power, and when I heard about Ragio, I knew I needed to find him. I felt the tug, so I went."

"Your power told you to go?" Cole said.

“My power doesn’t usually explain much,” Tessa said. “I get a feeling to say something or do something without knowing what will happen. But I was looking for the rest of my power, and it felt right to come to the cave, and then finding Ragio felt important.”

“What did you learn about Ragio?” Cole asked.

“He was a shaperafter spying for the Grand Shaper of Necronum,” Tessa said. “He was caught and killed. The imprint I met here said Ragio was involved with those who were trying to gather and control my power. Ragio’s echo ended up at Gamat Rue.”

“You could be at Gamat Rue too,” Cole said. “That might be where the trouble happened.”

“Maybe,” Tessa said. “If so, be really careful. Honor might have fallen into the same trap. Don’t be the third.”

Cole hesitated before asking his next question. “Who is the Grand Shaper of Necronum?”

“Really? You don’t even know that?”

Cole winced. “I’ve only been here a few days. Part of that time has been on the run.”

“Prescia Demorri,” Tessa said. “My aunt. Mother’s big sister. They were never very close. I met her at the castle when I was younger. I haven’t seen her since then. She’s been in hiding.”

Tessa signaled Honor, who came toward them. The imprint looked perfectly like her.

“Hello, Cole,” she said.

“Hi, Honor.”

Honor reached a hand out to Cole. His hand passed through hers.

“I told him,” Tessa said.

“That’s hopefully for the best,” Honor said. She turned to Cole. “Costa?”

“She’s fine,” Cole said. “We found her and restored her power.”

“That’s a relief. I gather events have gone poorly here?”

“Your star is up,” Cole said, not wanting to explain why they had recently come down. “Tessa’s too. Your mom told me you were in extreme danger.”

“You spoke with her?” Honor asked.

“Not too long ago,” Cole said. “I took the monorail from Zeropolis to Junction.”

“Mira is with you now?” Honor asked.

“Yes,” Cole said.

“Don’t let her come after us,” Honor said. “She is no warrior, and her powers are

irrelevant here. I had Desmond and Oster with me. I knew what you know. If I failed, something is really wrong. Who knows what you're up against? Send help, surely, but not Mira. We can't risk losing her. She could do more good by rallying others to help us."

That made sense to Cole. "I'll try to convince her. It isn't always easy."

"I know," Honor said. "I'm sorry this responsibility has fallen to you. I should have found Tessa."

"Don't apologize," Cole said. "We don't even know what happened yet."

"I imagine you are in a hurry," Honor said.

"Actually, yeah," Cole said. "You don't know the way out, do you?"

"I was in a hurry too," Honor said. "The common wisdom has it that you just need to keep going uphill."

"I've heard the same," Cole said. He stared at Honor and Tessa. They looked so real! "Any last requests?"

"Tell Mira I love her," Tessa said. "Tell her to be careful."

"Watch out for echoes," Honor said. "There is a new force at play in the echolands."

"Nazeem," Cole said.

"He has a name?" Honor asked.

"Seems like he has just revealed himself lately," Cole said. "I'll try to be careful."

"Tell Mira I order her not to come for us personally," Honor said. "And that I care for her."

"I'll pass it along," Cole said.

"Thank you, Cole," Tessa said.

"I'll do my best," he replied.

Turning away from them, he hurried back the way he had come. It wouldn't be long before they forgot him. Cole wondered if he would see their faces again.



## CHAPTER

# 9

## SHIVER

**T**wilight had fallen by the time Cole exited the Cave of Memory. He assumed it was evening but supposed it could be morning. It was hard to be sure how long he had wandered the caverns.

Finding the entrance had been no trouble. He followed upward slopes for less than an hour before he met once again with the imprint of the woman who waited near the opening.

As Cole walked out, he had looked back and seen himself standing near the woman. His imprint had waved. Cole waved as well, aware that his duplicate wouldn't remember the gesture.

When Cole had hesitated to round the bend that would conceal his imprint from sight, his imprint called out, "Go save everybody. I've got this!"

Cole had turned and exited, happy to know he could be so brave about an eternity stuck in a cave. Well, at least he could *act* brave about it.

Cole found Dalton, Jace, Mira, and Joe waiting with Hunter not too far beyond the mouth of the cave, their horses tied up nearby. Cole saw them before they looked his way.

"Dalton!" Cole called. "Jace! You made it!" He jogged over to them.

Jace snorted derisively. "If you made it, of course we did."

"Slower than me," Cole observed.

"Our road from the crossroads took us the wrong direction," Jace said.

"And a guy tried to swindle us when we bought horses," Dalton said. "One of them was basically lame."

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Jace quickly clarified.

"Do you think you showed the guy your freemark enough?" Dalton asked.

Jace shoved him playfully. "At least I wasn't apologizing."

The dynamic between Jace and Dalton seemed friendlier than Cole had seen it. In times past, Dalton's joke would have made Jace genuinely angry. Perhaps the time alone together had been good for them.

"Did you find Tessa?" Mira asked.

"Would I have come out if I hadn't?" Cole replied.

"Maybe if you were hungry," Hunter said. "You didn't bring food. We had some. I called out once I noticed, but you didn't hear."

Cole did feel hungry. Just the mention of food made the void in his belly seem to double in size. But he put on a brave face. "I'm fine. I ate some bats."

"Whatever," Dalton said.

"And a few tarantulas," Cole added. "It's hard to eat something that keeps biting you."

"Gross," Mira said. "So . . . Tessa?"

"And Honor," Cole said. "Can we talk?" He looked to Hunter. "Are there echoes around?"

Hunter nodded at the sky. "Shiver Moon tonight." Cole followed his gaze to a smallish moon glowing a crystalline blue. He had seen it before. Mira had told him the name once. It wasn't in the sky most nights. "That means if you don't see echoes, they aren't around."

"A Shiver Moon makes echoes visible?" Cole asked.

"You can't miss them," Hunter said. "Many in Necronum stay indoors when the Shiver Moon rises."

"Does it let them hurt you?" Jace asked, not quite succeeding at nonchalance.

"No more than usual," Hunter said. "Many people just don't want to interact with echoes. Not without reason. Some mess with your head. Some might haunt you. Lots of people follow superstitions about how to keep echoes away."

"What do they do?" Jace asked casually.

"It varies by community," Hunter said. "Some salt doorways. Others use wind chimes. I've seen offerings like bread or cheese left in yards overnight. Some people live beside or above running water. Others hang signs or post symbols. All of those people would hide indoors during a Shiver Moon."

"Does any of that stuff work?" Jace asked.

"I'm not sure," Hunter said. "I've noticed echoes don't seem to like running water. If it was me, I'd hire a skilled weaver to work protections around my home."

"Will we see echoes tonight?" Dalton asked, eyeing the woods.

"Probably not too many roaming the wilderness," Hunter said. "I expect we'll see

plenty when we get near Rincomere.”

“We’re heading back to town?” Cole asked.

Hunter glanced around. “Unless you want to wander blindly through the forest. Rincomere has the nearest decent crossroads.”

“We already have rooms booked,” Joe said.

“Where are we going?” Mira asked Cole. “What did Tessa tell you?”

“Honor and Tessa both send their love and say hello. They don’t want you coming to rescue them.”

“Whatever,” Mira said. “Where?”

“When Tessa left the Cave of Memory, her next stop was a place called Gamat Rue.”

“The old prison?” Hunter asked.

“You make that sound bad,” Jace said.

“It has a terrible reputation,” Hunter said. “Some places in Necronum are haunted by bad echoes. Gamat Rue is supposed to be one of the worst. Why would Tessa go there?”

Cole explained about Tessa risking interaction with the echomancer Nandavi in hopes of finding Ragio and learning where to go to fully recover her power.

“You learned more than I knew about Gamat Rue,” Hunter said. “I never heard the name Nandavi.”

“Tessa felt her power urging her to go there,” Cole said.

“She has blind faith in her intuition,” Mira said. “Her impulses tend to set things in motion. Not always good things.”

“Tessa told me her power has been coming back over the past few years,” Cole said. “It’s been helping her avoid trouble.”

“Trouble obviously caught up to her,” Jace said.

“Our job will be to figure out where,” Mira added.

“We should get back to Rincomere,” Joe said, starting toward the horses. “We’ll already be riding in darkness.”

“The Shiver Moon will light the way,” Hunter assured them.

“And plenty of other things,” Jace grumbled unhappily.

\* \* \*

They rode slowly by the icy moonlight—single file, Joe in the front, Hunter at the rear. Cole swept the wilderness with his gaze but didn’t see any echoes until they

neared the village.

In a grove of trees near an outlying farm, Cole noticed a silver-white flicker. Joe reined in his horse to take a look, stopping the other five riders. The figure emerged from the woods, walking toward them. He was an older man, softly glowing a translucent silver.

Nervous tingles ran down Cole's spine as he watched the echo. The somber old guy could have wandered straight out of a ghost story. Cole wondered if this had once been his farm. Maybe he was just roaming.

Dalton looked back at Cole. *Freaky*, he mouthed.

*I know*, Cole mouthed back.

Dalton pantomimed taking a picture.

Cole decided it was a good wish. How cool would it be to have photographic proof of an afterlife?

"Ride on," Hunter instructed. "Think of it like passing an ordinary person. If you ignore them, they'll generally ignore you."

Joe encouraged his mount to a trot. The others followed suit. The echo watched them ride away before turning back to the grove of trees. Cole glanced back a couple of times until he could no longer see the silvery shimmer.

Looking up, Cole noticed that the written message was gone from the sky. He mentioned it to Mira.

"Mother knows we check every night," Mira said. "I don't expect we'll get any more notes from her that way."

They passed more echoes as they neared Rincomere. Cole did his best not to stare, but it was hard not to sneak peeks. An older woman. Two middle-aged men. A child. Cole rode behind Jace and noticed that his friend never turned his head toward any of the apparitions.

A four-foot-high stone wall surrounded Rincomere—the perfect defense against a horde of raging turtles. If the attack ever came, Cole supposed the reptiles would enter along the road, since there was no gate.

The Shiver Moon hung high and the stars shone brightly as Cole and his group rode into the village. The streets were far busier than Cole had seen them during the day. All the people glowed a translucent silver white. So many echoes were strolling around and conversing that Cole wondered if anyone in Rincomere had ever left after they died.

"Go straight to the inn," Hunter advised from the rear.

Joe stayed at a trot, occasionally passing through echoes as he led the way along the

crowded street. Cole made eye contact with several individuals but tried to keep his gaze moving. Their little procession attracted some attention but not the full notice of the crowd. Many echoes went about their business with hardly a glance at the riders.

Cole ended up riding beside Dalton.

His buddy leaned toward Cole and spoke in a loud whisper. “*This* would be a cool Halloween.”

Cole chuckled, taking in the ghostly sights. “We finally got our awesome spook alley.”

“Not worth it,” Dalton said. “We should have bobbed for apples.”

“Pretty cool, though,” Cole said, staring at a silvery woman holding the hand of a translucent child.

“Way cool,” Dalton agreed.

Joe dismounted in the modest courtyard of the Lollygag Inn. An obese echo relaxed on a bench in the yard, stroking his heavy mustache. Cole and the others led their horses to the stable. A dozing stableboy jumped up and offered to help them find stalls. Joe handed the boy some ringers.

*Linger at the stable.* The words entered Cole’s mind without him hearing them. It was undoubtedly Sando. *Don’t explain. Just linger.*

Cole offered to help with the horses. Dalton spoke up as well. Jace was the first of the group into the inn.

Each leading a pair of horses, the stableboy, Cole, and Dalton got the mounts settled into stalls. “I’ll take it from here,” the stableboy said.

“I’ll help, if you don’t mind,” Cole said. “I need to unwind.”

“Up to you,” the stableboy said.

“Aren’t you tired?” Dalton asked.

Cole was exhausted. Keeping his eyes open was starting to make them burn. He was hungry, even though he had grabbed some food from the saddlebags during the ride from the Cave of Memory. He was sore.

“I’m okay,” Cole lied. “It’s been a weird day. I could use some time to think.”

“Can’t you think in your room?” Dalton asked, glancing toward the stable entrance. “Lots of echoes out tonight.”

“I want to be doing something,” Cole said. “I’m good. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay,” Dalton said reluctantly. “See you in there.”

Cole started undoing his horse’s saddle. Dalton was right to encourage him inside. A warm meal sounded heavenly. Who would want to unsaddle their horse after a long day when somebody else had been paid to do it? Especially after so much travel.

*Go out to the yard,* Sando communicated.

Cole pulled the saddle off and set it aside. "I changed my mind," he told the stableboy. "I'm tired."

"I can't blame you," the stableboy said. "Good night."

Cole went out to the yard. He was alone except for the obese echo on the bench.

*Out to the street and left.*

Wondering where Sando was leading him, Cole followed the instructions. There were no regular people on the street but dozens of echoes. A tall woman with curly ringlets stared at Cole from behind a fan as she walked by.

*Now left down the alley.*

Cole paused. The gap between buildings was hardly an alley. He wasn't sure if he would fit without turning a little sideways.

*Yes, young sir. That's where I mean.*

Leading with one shoulder, Cole entered the gap, dirt and pebbles grinding underfoot. As Cole progressed, he heard squeaking up ahead. He paused, not eager to end the night with rat bites.

*Keep coming, young sir. All is well.*

"Then why do we need to talk," Cole muttered.

*A convenient opportunity, giver of silver. A pleasant moon smiles down. And I have some tidings.*

Cole continued forward. The narrow alley intersected another gap between buildings, and Cole found Sando around the corner, seated, his body translucent silver, his hat mostly hiding his face.

"That hat is almost an umbrella," Cole said.

Sando looked up, eyes crinkling as he smiled. "Quite so, young sir. You had some success at the Cave of Memory."

"I guess you would know," Cole said.

"Yes, I do," Sando agreed. "I prefer for my tips to deliver results. I could not sense you while you were inside the cave, but I heard what you shared with your friends afterward." He shook his head and his expression grew serious. "Gamut Rue is no place to visit. Mortals should stay away. Echoes too."

"We have to go there," Cole said.

"So I gather," Sando said. "Be wary. There are a few places where echoes can directly harm mortals. Gamut Rue is one."

"Can we protect ourselves?" Cole asked.

"Easy," Sando said, grinning toothlessly. "Don't go there."

“And if we have to go?”

“Send somebody else.”

“Are you volunteering?” Cole asked.

Sando laughed. “You are funny tonight, young sir. I am no adventurer.”

“Thanks for the help back at the other inn,” Cole said.

“Thank the horse,” Sando said.

“Did you send it?” Cole asked.

Sando snickered. “I did not directly control the animal, if that is what you mean. Did I play a role in the mare being there? Yes, indirectly. I have news.”

“You want me to give away the ringer?”

“In due time. Other news.”

“Don’t tell me we have to run again,” Cole said, unsure if he could endure another night in the saddle.

“Not yet,” Sando said. “If you were less tired, perhaps. Enforcers are coming. Rest tonight. Start early. There is a little-known trail that leads into the hills. It will keep you out of sight and serve as a shortcut if you intend to visit Gamat Rue.”

“How do I find it?”

“I will guide you in the morning. Just keep the ringer in your pocket, young sir.”

“What if they have a perceptiveness?”

“These do not,” Sando said, head bobbing. “A prudent concern, though.”

“How do I reach you if I need you?” Cole asked.

Sando made a sour face and scrubbed his hands together. “This would be difficult for you, young sir. You are no weaver. If we must talk, I will contact you. It is no small feat, but I will. The ringer helps. The Enforcers will arrive tomorrow afternoon. Depart long before then.”

“We will,” Cole said.

“Sleep well,” Sando said.

“Any tips on Gamat Rue?”

“Only the one, young sir. Don’t go. Some places are best left alone.”

“Could the girl we’re looking for be there?” Cole asked.

“If she went there, she could certainly still be there,” Sando said. “But I know of few foolhardy enough to go after her.”

“You know me,” Cole said.

“Not for long, maybe,” Sando said. “I will try to label you brave instead of foolish. But honesty is always a consideration.”

“I’ll tell the others about your warning,” Cole said.

“Multiple warnings,” Sando replied. “Go rest.”

Cole hurried back the way he had come and caught up with the others just as the food was arriving. Day-old bread and oily stew never tasted so good.



## CHAPTER

# 10

## TUTO

Sando's trail was very well hidden. It didn't connect to any road. As the sun came up, Cole led the others into a pathless forest and over a couple of ridges before finding the trailhead near a large pond.

*As promised, young sir, Sando spoke to Cole's mind. One last time, I ask you to reconsider your destination.*

"This is it," Cole said.

"Good," Hunter said. "This route is sneaky." He climbed down from his horse and unbundled some rolled blankets. "I did some buying in the small hours. There are ways to get shops to open."

"Were you pretending to still be an Enforcer?" Dalton asked.

"I'm not sure I have to pretend. I haven't been discharged. I wore a disguise." He handed Joe a sword in a sheath, then gave Jace a crossbow and a small quiver with six quarrels. Dalton received a short sword, and Hunter strapped on a sword of his own. "Considering how I got these weapons, I didn't want to show them on the way out of town. We should be fine now."

"These don't happen to work on echoes?" Jace asked, aiming his crossbow at a tree.

"That would be nice," Hunter said. "I expect they'll prove more useful against Enforcers and legionnaires. Do you know how to use it?"

"The basics," Jace said. "I practiced with one like it at the Sky Raiders."

"Cole and Mira already have their Jumping Swords," Hunter said. "No need to turn them into walking armories."

"Riding, not walking, thank goodness," Mira said.

Cole rubbed the hilt of his Jumping Sword. It had a good blade, but its real value was dormant in Necronum unless he could get his power back. As he reached for his ability, he felt no glimmer of it.

“My echo friend told me the ride should take about five days,” Cole said. “The trail ends like it starts—without connecting to a road. But if we continue straight past the end, we’ll reach roads that connect to a town called Houndsborough. I guess it isn’t far from there to Gamat Rue.”

“We could last comfortably for a week on our provisions,” Hunter said. “Let’s ride.”

Cole spent the day glancing back, especially whenever they crested a rise and a view spread out behind them, but he never saw pursuers. The deeper they journeyed into the forested hills, the calmer he became. Sometimes he slipped a hand into his pocket, but he received no further communication from Sando, which hopefully meant they got away clean.

That evening after making camp, Cole went with Mira to refill their flasks from a stream. He had been waiting for a chance to talk to her alone. She chose a spot where the water flowed swiftly. She knelt beside the stream in the fading light. Deep circles stood out under her eyes.

“Long day,” Cole said.

“It doesn’t stop,” she said, her voice a little numb. “We scramble from one danger to another. It’s all we do. You’re crazy for staying with me.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Cole said. “You have enough stress.”

She paused and looked at Cole. “Have you ever been to the seashore?”

“Yeah,” Cole said. “A couple of times.”

“Once, I was at the beach, and I swam out to play in the waves. It was fun. I was a few years younger than I am now, so it was a very long time ago. I would duck the waves, or go over them, or brace myself and let them break against me. Until a big one got me. Playtime ended immediately. It had full control, holding me under and shaking me. And that wasn’t the worst of it. The wave was the first in a series. I got my head above water to take a breath as another one was breaking. It was relentless. I tumbled blindly. Salt water burned in my nostrils. I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I had no control over my body. I couldn’t influence the outcome. I kept struggling mostly by instinct, but at some level I knew it was just a matter of time. I was going to die.”

“You didn’t die,” Cole pointed out.

“One of our bodyguards came and got me,” Mira said. “Without him, who knows?”

“That’s why you keep good people around you,” Cole said. “We help one another.”

“This is different,” Mira said, her eyes haunted, her voice trembling. “We can’t get away from these waves. There’s no shore. They keep coming, bigger and stronger, swallowing everyone I care about.”

“I know you’re worried about Tessa,” Cole consoled.

“Not just Tessa,” Mira insisted. “You. Jace. Dalton. Hunter. Joe. Honor. Costa. Ella. My mother. Twitch. Skye. Your poor friend Jenna. So many people. And it keeps getting worse. How much longer can we keep coming up for air? How long before the whole world gets swallowed?”

“You’re tired,” Cole said.

“Not just tired,” Mira said. “I’m worn out, Cole. I don’t know how much more I can take. I used to hate being the fourth daughter of the High King. I felt like a useless mascot. I also hated living anonymously in exile. But give me either of those lives! Anything but this.”

Cole had never seen Mira let her guard down this completely. She had seemed more frayed lately. Her worries about Tessa were pushing her toward the edge.

“We’ll save your sister,” Cole said.

“Will we?” Mira asked. “None of us have any idea how to go up against an echomancer.”

“I’ve meant to talk to you about that,” Cole said. “Your sisters didn’t want you to go after them. Not you personally, at least. They didn’t think the risk made sense. They want you to send people. The echo who helped us gave me the same advice. He said nobody should go to Gamat Rue. Maybe we should recruit some help.”

Mira set down her flask and smoothed her hands over her shirt. Her expression grew calm before speaking, but Cole had a feeling she was exercising restraint. “Thank you, Cole. I appreciate your concern. It makes sense to try to get help. Maybe we can find somebody. I wasn’t saying that I’m giving up.” Tears came to her eyes. “Or maybe I was, a little. Cole, part of me wants this to end at Gamat Rue, just to be done. I want this to be over. But it isn’t fair to take everybody with me. And it isn’t fair to give up on Tessa! Why’d she have to get drawn into this?”

Mira buried her face in her hands and shook with sobs. Cole wasn’t sure how to respond. He drew near and put an arm around her. She leaned into him, which he took as a good sign.

As Mira continued to cry, his heart ached. He felt bad for her, and for Tessa, and for himself, and for Jenna. Things really were terrible. But you couldn’t just sink to the bottom! You had to keep coming up for air.

“Nobody is leaving you,” Cole said.

Mira brought her sobbing under control. Leaning away from Cole, she wiped snot from below her nose. “You know where to find Jenna. We’re going the wrong way.”

“I’ll worry about Jenna later,” Cole said. “She’s not in immediate danger.”

“If you get killed, who helps her?” Mira asked.

“Dalton.”

“What if you both get killed?”

“I don’t know,” Cole said, not wanting to face the question. “She’ll do her best. Nazeem wants me. What if I lead him to her? We’ll take care of your stuff first. If we beat your dad and Nazeem and Owandell, then I can really work on helping all the kids who were taken.”

“That’s a lot of optimism.”

“I’m not saying we’ll succeed,” Cole said with a laugh.

She laughed too.

“It’s the plan that makes the most sense to me,” Cole said. “If we’re drowning, it seems like the shortest distance to the surface.”

“I guess,” Mira said.

“At least right now we’re between waves,” Cole said, looking around. “We can breathe tonight, right?”

“Can we?” Mira asked. “I mean, mentally it doesn’t stop. So many people are after us. Terrible things are ahead of us. The stars are gone. Who knows how Tessa is suffering?”

“You weren’t like this before,” Cole said. “You’re extra worried about Tessa.”

Mira squinted and teared up. “She’s so little. Thinking of her in hiding was all right. She doesn’t deserve to be hunted. Nobody ever really treated her like a person. Because of her gift, you know? I think I was her only friend. My poor little sister.”

“I’ll save her, Mira,” Cole said. “I promise.” The words brought a feeling of irrational bravery, like when he had jumped at the cyclops or charged the Rogue Knight. Something about protecting people brought out the best in him.

Mira looked at him through her tears. “I hope so. You’re a good friend.”

“You’re a good sister,” Cole said. “Now wipe your face before Jace decides I’m abusive.”

“I’m not a crier,” she professed.

“Obviously,” Cole joked.

“Save it,” Mira said, her normal personality returning a bit. “Not a word to anybody.”

“As long as you think about sitting this one out,” Cole said.

Real anger entered her eyes. “Cole, all I have is saving my sisters. It’s my fight, and it’s all I have. Do you think I care about surviving? I haven’t cared about that for a long

time. I only worry about failing them. I could get captured or killed just as easily in hiding. If I go down, I want to be helping them.”

“Die bravely,” Cole said.

“The Sky Raiders had some things right.”

“Too bad our Jumping Swords don’t work. I’d feel a little braver.”

“Get your power back,” Mira encouraged.

“I keep trying. Still nothing.”

“We’ll find a way.”

Cole smiled. “Look at you being optimistic.”

Mira shrugged. “It beats crying into our water flasks.”

\* \* \*

A tidy cottage came into view the third day on the trail. Joe spotted it first, a few hundred yards ahead, halfway up the next incline, nestled among lush evergreens. Before they could move out of sight, a figure came to the porch and waved at them.

Joe lifted a hand in reply. “We’re in the middle of nowhere,” he said. “Hopefully, this person won’t be trouble.”

“Stay ready for anything,” Hunter said. “Necronum draws some strange hermit types. They live lonely lives muttering to echoes. Not always healthy for the sanity.”

Cole and the others rode up to the cottage. A man awaited them on the porch, his long, graying hair fastened back in a single thick braid. Several sets of wind chimes dangled from the eaves. Without a breeze they hung limp.

“I only get visitors out here during Shiver Moons,” the man greeted. “I seldom see flesh-and-blood people—let alone a band of mostly children. What brings you so deep into the wild?”

Mira and Joe whispered together.

“You have some marks of the Unseen on your walls and on that rain barrel,” Joe said.

The man smiled. “I live far from regular roads. I should have suspected you might be fellow radicals.”

“Do you have the latest code phrase?” Joe asked.

“Probably not the latest,” the man replied. “If you hear it twice?”

“It might be an echo,” Joe said.

“Three times?”

“Kids chanting rhymes.”

“Four?”

“A bore. That’s an older one but it was accurate.”

“I don’t get much contact out here,” the man said. “I remain a sympathizer, but I’ve been inactive for some time. I go by Tuto. My given name is a tongue twister.”

“Let’s hear it,” Cole said.

“Tutoulohavanoook,” the man replied. “You must be weary. Let me open my home to you for the night, humble though it may be.”

Joe turned toward Mira. “It would mean stopping early.”

“You’re a weaver?” Mira asked.

“Guilty as charged,” the man replied.

“Talking to a friendly weaver would be worth the time,” Mira said.

Tuto placed a hand on his chest. “I’ll help however I can. I remain devoted to the cause. Please, come inside.”

After tying up the horses, they joined Tuto in his cozy cottage. A footstool and a cask were used as extra chairs. Cole thought Tuto seemed a little overwhelmed by all the people, but he remained good-natured as he gave them water to drink and bowls of what tasted like cool, creamy oatmeal.

Jace left his bowl untouched while he lingered by a wall where a variety of medallions hung on pegs. “Do you make these?” he asked casually.

“I do,” Tuto said. “They ward off echoes.”

“Do they work?” Jace asked.

“Some shysters sell cheap trinkets,” Tuto said. “These are all made with strong weaving.”

“I might be interested,” Jace said, fingering a pendant made of wood, bone, beads, and leather. “We should talk later.”

Tuto turned to Mira. “You wanted to talk to a weaver. How may I be of service?”

“We have to go someplace dangerous,” Mira said. “Gammat Rue.”

Tuto’s jaw dropped. He looked at the others, as if to make sure they were all in agreement on such an absurd idea. “The accursed prison?” he finally asked. “Why?”

“To save somebody,” Mira said.

Tuto sucked in a lot of air through puckered lips and shook his head. “Anybody who got lost there is not coming back. Let it be.”

“We know she went there,” Mira said. “And we know she isn’t dead.”

“How can you be sure?” Tuto asked.

“There are ways to know things,” Mira replied evenly.

Tuto considered her closely. “There are ways, I suppose. You are sure about your

ways? This girl is definitely alive? And definitely at Gamat Rue?"

"She was definitely alive a few nights ago," Mira said. Cole knew Mira meant the last night they had seen Tessa's star. "And I know she went to Gamat Rue. She may not still be there. If we can't find her, we need to talk to a certain echo named Ragio."

Shaking his head, Tuto rubbed his thighs. "You are determined?"

"Completely," Mira said.

"This person is special?" Tuto asked.

"You have no idea," Mira said.

"Important to our cause?" Tuto wondered.

Mira glanced at Joe, then over at Cole. "We really need help, so I'm going to tell you a secret. Will you keep it?"

"Yes."

"You're a weaver," Mira said. "Swear by the strongest oath you know."

"That's a lot to ask," Tuto said.

"It's the price of knowing," Mira insisted. "It's a secret vital to the rebellion. Just keep the secret, and the oath won't matter."

"All oaths matter," Tuto said. "But I sense sincerity, and frankly, I'm curious. If I divulge this secret, may my bindings never hold and all my weavings be undone. May all echoes dominate me and the echolands provide no refuge."

Mira glanced at Hunter.

"Sounds strong to me," Hunter said.

"The girl in danger is Destiny Pemberton, daughter of Stafford Pemberton," Mira said.

"Her echo?" Tuto asked, marveling.

"Maybe, but she's alive," Mira said. "A strange type of shaping called shapecraft stopped her from aging when her father took her powers. Now her power is returning, and she is on the run."

"Your words carry the power of truth," Tuto said somberly. "This is . . . beyond belief. A surviving heir could change the entire complexion of the rebellion."

"Exactly," Mira said. "We have to rescue her. How can you help?"

"You give me much to ponder," Tuto said. He folded his arms and tucked his chin down. When he spoke again, the words came slowly. "A man prepares his whole life for an opportunity like this, never knowing if it will come. A chance to put his principles into action in a way that could make a real and lasting difference. A test of his abilities greater than he would undertake except at extreme need." He looked to Hunter. "You have weaving abilities, young man?"

“I have some experience,” Hunter said.

“Your power burns bright,” Tuto said. “I’ve not seen such variety. But your weaving is less developed than some of your talents.”

“I’ve had less experience in Necronum than other kingdoms,” Hunter said.

“Yet you can see across to the echolands,” Tuto said. “And you can weave there. Have you stepped across?”

“Not yet,” Hunter said.

Tuto nodded. His gaze returned to Mira. “You need the help of an experienced weaver. If you desire, I will come with you to Gamat Rue.”

Mira smiled. “Thank you. We’d love extra guidance. Have you been there?”

“No, but I have visited some unsettling haunting grounds. I will develop a strategy to get us in and out with the lowest possible risk.” Tuto’s gaze took in everyone in the room. “I cannot guarantee the safety of any who venture there. It is a very real possibility that none of us will survive. Your life could be lost and your echo trapped. The price of failure could be paid not only in this world, but for eons in the afterlife.”

Jace had no color in his face. “The echoes at Gamat Rue can hurt us?” he asked.

“Some powerful echoes can exert their power over a place,” Tuto said. “At the shrines and temples, the weavers of Necronum dedicate spaces where the echolands draw near. At haunting grounds, mighty echoes pull the physical reality of Necronum close to their realm. At Gamat Rue, echoes could harm you, and quite possibly kill you, taking your echo prisoner for ages untold.”

His posture rigid, his eyes not quite hiding the horror inside, Jace nodded. He cleared his throat. “So, how much did you say those pendants cost?”



## CHAPTER — 11 —

# GAMAT RUE

**T**he ruins of the ancient prison crowned a huge, brushy hill surrounded by dense woods. All roofing had caved in long ago, and many walls had collapsed into grassy heaps of rubble. The irregular fins of stonework that remained rose from the brush in bewildering shapes, leaving the design of the original structure unrecognizable. A few empty windows still contained rusty bars, giving the only clue that the broken ramparts once contained prisoners.

The midday sun glared down from almost directly overhead as Cole and the others gathered at the base of the hill near the edge of the woods. Each of them wore one of Tuto's pendants, though he had warned that most of the protection would be forfeited by knowingly entering the haunting ground. Jace wore three.

The journey from Tuto's cottage to Gamat Rue had provided no difficulties. Only forcing their way through the untamed forest around the hill had really slowed them.

"The timing could not be better," Tuto said. "Here in physical Necronum, the powers of Nandavi should be at their lowest ebb under the noonday sun."

"So we better get up there," Jace said, trying to sound relaxed.

"We don't want to wait too long," Tuto agreed.

"Somebody should stay with the horses," Cole said. They had led their mounts through the woods around the hill. "I vote for Dalton."

"Why me?" Dalton asked, not without some hopefulness.

"In case things go badly, you can go help Jenna," Cole said.

"Not everyone needs to do this," Mira said, looking up the long, gentle slope. "Cole? Hunter? Jace? Joe?"

"You should stay," Jace told Mira. "You're not a weaver. Why risk it? The revolution could be ruined without you. The rest of us can look for Tessa and Ragio just fine."

"I'm going," Mira said resolutely. "That's final."

“Then I’m with you,” Jace said without hesitation, though one hand strayed to a feathered pendant.

“I won’t leave your side,” Joe said.

“Me neither,” Cole added.

“I’d love to watch the horses,” Hunter said. “But I’m the only other person with some weaving skills. I better come.”

Dalton looked uncertainly at his horse. “We leave the horses tied up all the time. It won’t be that long.”

“You’re not only watching the horses,” Cole said. “This is for Jenna. And if none of us return, maybe you can find rescuers.”

“Stay,” Mira encouraged. “It makes sense.”

“All right,” Dalton said. “But come back. I don’t want to try to lead seven horses through those woods.”

“Weapons?” Jace asked, hefting his crossbow.

“We’re dealing with echoes,” Tuto said. “Normally, there would be no reason to involve tangible weapons. But at a haunting ground, sometimes echoes can take material form and interact with the matter of the physical world. In such cases, they may become temporarily vulnerable to physical weapons.”

“They can fight us?” Jace asked.

“Potentially,” Tuto said. “An echo might hurl a stone, or knock over a wall, or even push you directly.”

“He’s right,” Hunter said. “I’ve heard stories.”

Jace looked a little peaked. Cole clapped him on the arm. “At least we might be able to stab them. Better than nothing, right?”

Face valiantly composed, Jace gave a nod.

“Stay near me,” Tuto said. “We should do this together. There is some strength in numbers.”

They hiked up the hillside. Cole could picture that in the dark, the eroded remains of the ancient prison could be scary. But under the sunlight, walking with friends, it felt more like a field trip.

Tuto halted a few steps downhill from the first broken wall. Scarred blocks littered the brush ahead of him. Tuto pointed at a timeworn chunk of carved masonry.

“The area is marked,” Tuto said. “It’s a warning that we are entering haunted ground. Such a warning further limits our protection. We are knowingly trespassing.”

“So why tell us?” Cole asked.

“There are other warnings around the site,” Tuto said, scanning the area. “Some

written in plain language. You'll feel the difference when we enter the former boundaries of Gamat Rue. Your senses will warn you to depart."

"What's our strategy?" Jace asked, trying to sound businesslike, but failing to mask his uneasiness.

"Stay strong," Tuto said. "The echoes here will take what you give them. Your fear or uncertainty will only encourage them. They may ask for things. They may harass you for trespassing. Agree to nothing. We will collectively maintain that we have a right to be here because they may have harmed Destiny. We will not accept their claim to this place. We will not admit to being trespassers. Standing firm on those issues will make it harder for them to bother us."

"Can they sense if we're secretly afraid?" Jace asked.

"Our thoughts and emotions will be at least partially exposed to the echomancer," Tuto said. "But what you claim to believe still matters. Acting confident carries weight no matter how you privately feel."

"Could Destiny actually be here?" Mira asked.

Tuto shrugged and raised both hands. "I don't see any other people around. I suppose there could be unseen dungeons where live prisoners are held. We'll know more once we enter Gamat Rue."

"If we can't find Destiny, we'll want to learn what Ragio knows," Hunter reminded everyone.

"As soon as we enter, I'll start looking for him," Tuto pledged. Shielding his eyes, he glanced upward. "The sun can't get much higher. Shall we proceed?"

Now that the moment had arrived, Cole felt deep reluctance. He touched the ringer in his pocket. There had been no word from Sando since the morning they left Rincomere. The old echo had already made it clear that visiting Gamat Rue was a bad idea. The prospect of finding out how bad made Cole a little nauseated. He noticed Jace's tight grip on his crossbow.

"Let's get this over with," Mira said.

Tuto moved as if to continue up the hill, then hesitated and looked over his shoulder. "Take care with your weapons. Without caution, the chances are greater of us hurting one another than damaging any echoes."

Cole took his hand off the hilt of his Jumping Sword. He noticed Jace engage the safety on the crossbow.

Staying near the others, Cole weaved between low piles of rubble and passed the first crumbling wall of the prison. As he stepped beyond the wall, an immense feeling of dread took hold of him. Something was not right here. The temperature noticeably

dropped, and the air became clammy. Suddenly, the daylight felt wrong, almost as if he had put on tinted sunglasses—the light seemed a bit dimmer, and the colors were off. His instincts screamed for him to run.

“Feel it?” Tuto asked. “This is our warning.” His voice was too muffled, as if speaking from another room.

Cole’s skin rippled into goose bumps, and the hairs on his arms and neck stood tall. Beside him, Jace breathed shallowly, wide eyes darting. Cole nudged him with his elbow. “Scared?” Even from his own lips, the word seemed distant. Cole remembered words sounding like this once when he took a flight with a cold and his ears were slow to pop.

Focus returned to Jace’s gaze. He clenched his jaw and gave Cole a scowl, his thumb on the safety of his crossbow.

“This way,” Tuto said, walking briskly.

The top of the hill was either naturally flat or else had been leveled to accommodate the prison. As Cole advanced, he found the perspectives confusing. There were more walls and pillars than it appeared from down the hill, and the distances between them were disconcertingly unpredictable. A stony barrier looked ten paces away, but he would reach it in three. Another appeared five paces away, but it would take fifteen steps to get there. He got the feeling that when he wasn’t looking in a particular direction, the ruins were shifting position, only to hold mockingly still when his gaze returned.

Stepping carefully around a heap of broken slabs, Mira quietly drew her Jumping Sword. Joe stayed at her side. Jace pointed his crossbow toward the ground and released the safety, his finger near the trigger.

Hunter came closer to Cole. He muttered something inaudible, then raised his voice. The words were still almost too soft to hear. “This place is crammed with echoes.”

“Yeah?” Cole asked.

“I haven’t looked across. But I can feel them.”

“I can feel something,” Cole said. The dread inside was mounting. He wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to talk. He felt like a mouse sneaking through a room full of sleeping cats.

“Stay calm,” Hunter said. “Hopefully, we can get this over with quickly.”

The air was unusually heavy and still. It seemed reluctant to fill Cole’s lungs, reluctant to carry words, reluctant to part for intruders.

Tuto led them purposefully to a circular clearing at the center of the ruins. Unlike

elsewhere, no brush or weeds grew inside the circle. No walls or rubble interrupted the naked expanse of rock and dirt, though plenty surrounded it.

*Give the ringer to Jace*, a voice instructed in Cole's mind. The words came clearly—apparently, the drowsy atmosphere of Gamat Rue didn't interfere with mental communication.

"Now?" Cole asked, the whispered word barely making it past his lips.

Tuto instructed them to gather in a ring.

*Yes, immediately*, Sando replied in his mind.

Cole formed a circle with the others, Hunter on one side, Jace on the other. Wasn't this a suspicious time for Sando to make this request? Couldn't it wait until they got out of the prison? Was he up to something?

*We had a deal, Cole*, Sando insisted. *Deliver the ringer now, or you break your promise. You don't want to do that in a place like this. I've been helping you. Quick. Do it now.*

Cole's hand went to his pocket, and his fingers easily found the ringer.

"Jace," Cole murmured. His friend didn't hear, so he repeated it louder.

Jace glanced at him.

Cole held out his hand, the silver ringer pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

Looking a little bewildered, Jace extended his hand.

Cole set the ringer on his palm.

And Sando appeared in the middle of the circle. "Hold them," the wiry beggar commanded, his voice unusually resonant.

Tuto began gesticulating, hands describing fluid patterns as he crouched and swiveled. Cole's head was tugged upward, his muscles tensing in unison, and suddenly, he couldn't move. Even his eyes were locked in place, though he could see the others around him, at least peripherally. They all held their chins up and stood very still.

Tuto continued to pivot and pose, as if demonstrating a martial art.

"Greetings," Sando said with a toothless smile, eager eyes taking in the entire group. He looked perfectly tangible. "I am the echo who helped you elude capture twice. Cole was kind enough to complete our bargain and release me from my promise to do no harm."

Cole couldn't move, but everything inside of him withered. Here was the real price of Sando's help! The moment Cole handed over the coin, the old beggar had been freed to turn on them precisely when they were most vulnerable. And Tuto was clearly an accomplice. In complete stillness, Cole battled fruitlessly to move. He had

failed to foresee how delivering a coin could lead to serious trouble. He had made the wrong deal with the wrong echo. Consequently, he and his friends were doomed.

Hunter collapsed. Cole tried to turn his head, or at least his eyes, but could do nothing more than pay extra attention to his peripheral vision.

“I see you mean to rush this,” Sando said irritably. “Tuto, permit all but Mira and Cole to speak. I need volunteers to cross to the echolands. Without other offers, I take Mira.”

“Me,” Jace said immediately.

“No, me,” Joe volunteered right after him.

Cole tried to speak, but his vocal chords refused to respond. He couldn't even grunt. The only action he could manage was to breathe very slowly.

“Nandavi?” Sando called, pointing at Jace. “Him.”

Jace flopped to the ground. Cole could only see him in the corner of his vision, but after hitting the dirt, Jace looked very still. Cole didn't see Nandavi anywhere. If she was present, she wasn't visible.

Cole lurched and lunged and thrashed and screamed, all without budging an inch or making a sound. He couldn't even go limp. Every muscle remained tightly fixed in position.

Then Sando pointed at Joe. “And him.”

Joe crumpled as well. Cole could see this better, since Joe was across from him.

Cole exerted himself violently but again failed to even twitch. His friends were dying! It was his fault! And there was nothing he could do.

Sando grinned at Mira. “I neglected to clarify that even with those volunteers, you will still come to the echolands. My preference would be to keep this tidy. Mira, I will claim Cole unless you volunteer. Tuto, let her speak.”

“Will he live if I volunteer?” Mira asked sharply.

“I will not take him to the echolands if you come now,” Sando said. “Hurry. The offer won't last.”

Cole tried to scream *No!* Nothing came out. Not a squeak. Not a whimper.

“You won't take him to the echolands?” Mira asked. “Or he will live and go free?”

Sando wrinkled his nose. “Fine. Yes. Cole will live and go free.”

“All right,” Mira said.

“Nandavi?” Sando asked, indicating Mira.

She dropped like a marionette with her strings cut. Mira didn't just look unconscious. She looked dead.

Cole no longer tried to thrash. He seemed to shrink. Jace, Joe, and Mira? Just like

that? He couldn't sag. He couldn't cry. He couldn't blink. He could only stand there with his chin up, his muscles frozen, and his heart desolate.

Sando glanced at Tuto, who continued to flutter his arms and fingers. "This got a little messier than I would have preferred. The boy Dalton stayed behind, and Cole must be monitored—"

Hunter appeared. Cole felt confused. Hunter was slumped on the ground on the opposite edge of his vision from Jace. And yet he had just materialized between Cole and Sando.

The Hunter who had just appeared dove toward Jace, snatched the crossbow, rolled, and aimed. The quarrel hit Tuto in the chest.

And suddenly, the stretched feeling in Cole's neck ended. His other muscles relaxed as well. He could move!

Without pause, Cole drew his sword and charged Sando. The elderly beggar snarled and shuffled away from him. Reaching into his loose sleeve, Sando withdrew a knife, the blade much shorter than the Jumping Sword.

Cole didn't slow. He hacked at Sando's neck, but the beggar ducked and slid away, swinging his knife but not quite reaching Cole's belly. Hunter had his sword in hand and quickly looped around behind Sando. The beggar noticed and lunged toward Cole, trying to stab him, but Cole knocked the blade aside with his sword, then slashed Sando's arm with a return stroke.

Sando vanished with a shrill yelp.

Hunter disappeared as well, his sword falling to the ground.

Tuto lay in the dirt, a shaft jutting from his ribs, chest hitching as redness gurgled from his lips. His eyes were tightly closed, his face scrunched in agony.

Cole ran to Mira. Her hair lay across her face. He hesitated to touch her. She wasn't just asleep. Her body looked lifeless. He brushed the hair away and felt for a pulse in her neck. She wasn't breathing. He could find no pulse. How could she really be dead? This was a nightmare!

Hunter's body sat up, the abrupt motion drawing Cole's eye.

"She's gone," Hunter said urgently. "Bring her body. I'll grab Jace."

"Wait, how are you back?" Cole asked, looking to Jace, Joe, and Mira, wanting to see them stir. "What about them?"

"Nandavi didn't steal my lifespark," Hunter said. "I crossed over on my own and stayed free. They're stuck there. Hurry."

Hunter rushed to Jace, reached under his arms, and started pulling. Cole seized Mira the same way and walked backward, her legs dragging. He kept his head turned

to monitor where he was going, which carried the benefit of letting him avoid looking at her.

But it was impossible not to feel her limp weight. Cole tried not to think. He was carrying Mira. She was not breathing. And it was his fault.

Hunter was moving faster. Cole managed to speed up a little but couldn't keep pace.

"What did you do?" Cole called, his words dampened by the oppressive atmosphere of Gamat Rue.

"I crossed over to the echolands," Hunter said.

"Was that when you collapsed?" Cole asked.

"Yeah," Hunter said, hauling Jace around a damaged fortification. "After a minute, I tried what the toothless old echo did. I brought my echo to the material world. I used the crossbow and chased your echo friend."

"Sando," Cole said, guilt writhing in his gut, shame tearing at him. "The echo is named Sando." His lips now spoke the name without difficulty. Arrangement fulfilled, Cole supposed.

"Yeah, well, when he retreated to the echolands, I went after him, but I wouldn't have lasted against him and Nandavi, so I returned to my body."

Cole focused on Hunter rather than the shifty ruins. They had almost reached the outermost wall.

"I didn't know you could do that," Cole said.

"Neither did I," Hunter replied. "First time." Hunter passed the outermost rampart and raised his voice. "Dalton! Get up here! Bring a horse!"



## CHAPTER

# 12

## BODIES

Cole positioned Mira beside Jace, and Hunter crouched between them, his hands on their foreheads. Hunter bowed his head.

“Can you help them?” Cole asked.

“Shhh,” Hunter hissed.

Cole tried to steady himself. Now that he was beyond the boundaries of Gamat Rue, it seemed like a regular day again. The temperature had warmed up. His voice sounded right. The sunlight had the correct brightness and color.

His head gently throbbed in sync with his heart. He was out of breath, sweaty, and still trying to shake off the effects of panic and shock. Otherwise, things were back to normal.

Except for his motionless friends sprawled in the brush.

“I should be able to keep their bodies stable,” Hunter said finally. “You and Dalton need to get Joe quickly.”

Dalton was on his way up the slope astride his horse.

“Wait,” Cole said. “They’re alive?” Could he have been mistaken? Could Mira just be unconscious?

“They’re in longsleep,” Hunter said. “The body can’t live without the lifespark. But when the lifespark is removed before the death of the physical body, a faint connection remains. If that connection is strengthened by weaving, the body can be preserved. As long as the connection persists, they’re not fully gone. In Necronum, an empty body can survive in stasis while the lifeforce is away. It’s how I left my body to slip into the echolands when Tuto bound us. It’s how mortal weavers visit the echolands without truly dying.”

“Should I try some CPR?” Cole asked. “Blow in their mouths?”

“We can’t restore the lifespark that way,” Hunter explained. “The body didn’t die. The spark was removed. But I can keep the bodies from rotting and help maintain the

connection to their sparks. The heart barely beats, the lungs barely breathe, but the body can still accept the lifeforce if it returns.”

“We can still save them?” Cole asked desperately.

“There’s a chance,” Hunter said.

“I don’t get how their sparks left.”

“Nandavi did it,” Hunter said. “She ripped their lifesparks from them. Back home we might say she took their spirits. There was no physical damage. If Sando or Tuto had stabbed them, there might not be a functional body left behind.”

Dalton reached them, reining in his horse and dismounting.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Ambush,” Cole said. “Tuto turned on us. My echo friend too. Mira, Jace, and Joe are basically dead.”

“Dead?” Dalton exclaimed.

“Not completely,” Hunter said. “But we can’t revive them without finding their echoes. You and Cole bring Joe here. We still might be able to save him too. I should stay with these bodies.”

“All right,” Cole said.

“Take off the pendants,” Hunter said. “Tuto was using them against us.”

Feeling angry and stupid, Cole pulled the pendant over his head and tossed it aside. Dalton chucked his in the opposite direction.

“The Gamat Rue echoes will harass you guys,” Hunter said. “It could get ugly. Don’t agree to anything if they try to communicate. If they become tangible and attack, defend yourselves. Get Joe.”

Cole and Dalton ran back into Gamat Rue. As soon as he passed the remnant of the outermost wall, Cole found it became much harder to sprint. The air didn’t want to part for him or fill his lungs, and gravity seemed to increase. The disorienting tricks of perspective started to make him feel dizzy. Cole slowed to a quick walk, and Dalton did likewise.

“Everything feels off,” Dalton said, the words weirdly muffled.

“This place is wrong,” Cole said. “Let’s get Joe and get out.”

Cole ground his teeth. This was an emergency! Why was he walking? In defiance of the sluggish atmosphere, Cole upped his pace to a jog, and Dalton matched him.

The barren circle soon came into view. Sando looked tangible again, kneeling beside Tuto. The beggar looked over his shoulder and saw Cole, then rose, knife in hand. Blood dripped from the blade.

Cole drew his Jumping Sword and rushed toward the echo. Dalton brandished his

short sword. Sando glanced at Joe's fallen form, then disappeared.

Tuto still had the arrow in his chest, but he was no longer wheezing. He lay still, his throat cut.

"Did he . . . ?" Dalton asked.

"Looks like it," Cole said. "Sando probably wanted to hurry Tuto to the echolands. Joe looks untouched. Grab a leg."

Keeping his sword out, Cole gripped Joe by one ankle and Dalton grabbed the other. They pulled him as quickly as they could manage.

"Going so soon?" asked Sando.

Glancing up, Cole saw that the beggar had reappeared in the barren circle. Cole scowled. Why did the echo's voice carry so well here when everyone else sounded far away?

"Keep going," Cole grumbled to Dalton.

"I have Miracle, you know," Sando said. "Reborn as an echo. Along with Jace and the fellow you're dragging."

"Congratulations," Cole yelled, pulling as hard as he could.

"Perhaps we could discuss—"

"No deals!" Cole shouted.

"You really should—"

Cole dropped Joe's ankle, spun, pointed his sword at Sando, and cried, "Away!"

The sword did not pull him forward. He hadn't felt his power, but he had so desperately wanted it to work that he thought maybe it might.

Sando chuckled through a grin. "You have some fire in you, young sir. I see why you amuse Nazeem. But that power of yours is a disaster. I could take a closer look if you wish. Make some recommendations?"

Cole took hold of Joe's ankle again and continued pulling. The beggar made no move to give chase. As Cole and Dalton progressed, a broken wall blocked Sando from view.

"You keep that body," Sando said, no longer visible but his voice still plenty loud. "You deserve a souvenir. I will see you soon, maybe. Why pursue what wants to find you?"

"Want to go get him?" Dalton asked.

"Yes," Cole said. "But he'll just disappear."

A blunt blow struck Cole on the shoulder, making him drop his sword and Joe's leg, then an invisible force shoved his chest, and he stumbled over some rubble and fell. Dalton staggered away from Joe as well. Cole rose, and a rock the size of his fist

flew by his head, brushing his ear. An invisible blow struck him behind the knees, and he was back on the ground.

“Stop it!” Cole yelled, punching and kicking the air around him, striking nothing.

One of Joe’s legs lifted, and an unseen force started dragging him. Dalton lunged at Joe, swinging his sword at the air above the raised leg, and the blade seemed to connect with something. The leg fell.

“Hurry,” Cole said as he raced to Joe, picked up the Jumping Sword, and grabbed an ankle.

Waving their swords at the empty air around them, Cole and Dalton scrambled as fast as they could with a grown man in tow. A rock thumped painfully against Cole’s back. Dalton grunted as a stone pelted his side.

Up ahead, past the final rampart, Cole saw Hunter pulling Jace down the slope. Mira already lay far beyond them.

“Almost there,” Cole encouraged. He dodged a rock that came from the side, then ducked one that sailed at him from up ahead.

“Keep going!” Hunter called as they passed beyond Gamat Rue and the air returned to normal.

“That’s better,” Dalton said.

Back in regular atmosphere, they both picked up the pace. A couple of rocks flew by to either side. One struck Joe’s thigh. As they proceeded down the slope, they moved out of range. Rocks stopped flying.

They halted when they reached Hunter, who crouched between Mira and Jace, his hands on their foreheads. Dalton’s horse roamed off to one side, farther down the slope, grazing in the tall grass.

Hunter hurried to Joe, hunching over him and cupping his face. “He’s not completely gone.”

“That’s something,” Cole said with relief. Reaching behind himself, he tried to rub his back just to the side of his spine, where the rock had hit. He couldn’t reach the spot very effectively. It sure ached.

“Should I go after my horse?” Dalton asked.

“Wait,” Hunter said. “It’s not running off. We have more horses than riders now. I need to catch you guys up.”

“I still don’t really get what happened,” Cole said. “Why didn’t Nandavi just kill us too?”

“Let me guess,” Hunter said. “Jace and Joe volunteered somehow.”

“Sando told them he would take Mira to the echolands if they didn’t,” Cole said.

“And didn’t mention he would still take her even if they volunteered,” Hunter concluded. “They were brave but stupid. It would have been a lot harder to hurt them if they had kept quiet. We might have all escaped.”

“I tried to volunteer too,” Cole admitted.

“That’s because you’re brave, and you didn’t know enough about the echolands,” Hunter said. “I imagine they kept you frozen, so you couldn’t speak.”

Cole nodded.

“Sando played us from the start,” Hunter said. “I’ve actually heard of that guy. And that isn’t a great sign, because I haven’t spent tons of time in Necronum. He’s a trickster. One of the worst. Known for getting things done.”

“That’s on me,” Cole said, staring at Mira’s body. The guilt hurt a lot worse than his back. He felt like he might puke.

“You got played,” Hunter said. “We all did. He’s a pro. All Sando asked you to do was hand over that ringer?”

“Yeah. I had to give it away at his command.” It was weird that the words came out so easily now.

“Seemed so innocent,” Hunter said. “Keep this ringer for me, and I promise to help you until our bargain is over.”

Cole nodded again.

“He used the ringer to track you and spy on us,” Hunter said. “He helped us get away from Enforcers but led us to a lonely path that went right by a weaver he liked to work with. I bet he set it up with Tuto before we got there. Probably taught him the outdated Unseen code words. Then when he wanted to turn on you, Sando had you give the ringer to Jace, and we were in trouble.”

“Why lead us away from the Enforcers?” Dalton asked. “They could have caught us days ago.”

“Sando probably wanted credit,” Hunter said. “And he may have wanted us in a place where our lifesparks would be extra vulnerable. He might have planned everything from the start. He might have known we’d end up at Gamat Rue when he first contacted Cole back at the Seven-Cornered Shrine. He probably could have guided us directly here. He might have just used the cave to build trust and put us off our guard. Or to get us close to the road that would lead us to Tuto. The way he did it was cleaner than armed Enforcers. Less risk of Mira getting physically hurt. I’m sure he wanted her body intact. Probably yours, too, Cole.”

“I’m an idiot,” Cole said.

“You couldn’t have known,” Dalton said.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Hunter agreed. “The deal you made seemed safe. You got good info in return for a small favor. We knew there might be a catch. We tried to be ready for it. I thought we were being careful, but we got burned.”

“Not just burned,” Cole said, tears stinging his eyes. His breathing became irregular as he tried not to burst into sobs. He waved a hand at his fallen friends. “Look at them.”

Hunter held up a finger. “We’re in Necronum. Their bodies are whole. You know, beyond getting scratched up from being dragged around. Don’t forget there’s still a chance we can save them.”

That helped Cole feel steadier. “You really went to the echolands?”

“Sando didn’t know my level of weaving talent,” Hunter said. “He didn’t expect me to cross over.”

“That was when you first collapsed,” Cole said.

“When my body was frozen, and I saw what was going on, I crossed over,” Hunter said. “It’s important that I’d never done it before. You only get one echo. Once you have one, you can only cross over when you’re near it. Same if you’re trying to get back to your physical body.”

“Had you deliberately saved crossing over for an emergency?” Dalton said.

“Yep,” Hunter said. “I never had a dire need before. Why waste your easiest trip?”

“How’d you know you could pull it off?” Cole asked.

Hunter shrugged, one hand still on Joe. “I wasn’t sure I could. I knew the theory, and I’m pretty good at all things shaping. It’s why people were scared of me as an Enforcer. Anyhow, I went for it, and it worked.”

“What was it like?” Cole asked.

Hunter blanched. “Not good. I’d heard of the music in the echolands. It penetrates you more deeply than the music we know here. You don’t just hear it. You feel it. When I went over, it seemed like I’d dropped into some freaky video game level. The music was seriously scary, and I was in this dark castle. Or maybe a fortress.”

“A prison?” Dalton asked.

“Sort of. It didn’t seem quite like a prison on that side. I’ve looked across a lot. Things don’t always match up like you might expect. Anyhow, Nandavi was there, but she was busy helping Tuto with his weaving. I went unnoticed at first. So I reached out for Ragio with my weaving and found him.”

“No way!” Cole said.

Hunter smiled. “Clutch performance, right? I connected with Ragio mind to mind. He was someplace nearby. I hunkered down in a quiet corner. We didn’t have long,

but I got the basics.”

“Do they have Destiny?” Cole asked.

“Nandavi tried,” Hunter said. “Tessa came here. But she got away alive. Her bodyguard wasn’t so lucky.”

“Honor?” Cole asked.

“Same story. She came and went. But a guy with her, Oster, died here.”

“I knew him,” Cole muttered, remembering the knight who had led him and a bunch of friends out of Blackmont Castle. How long before everyone he knew was dead? Jace, Mira, and Joe lay motionless. They’d survived some hardships together, but it felt like things were unraveling. His darkest worries were coming true.

Hunter snapped his fingers. “Cole? You with me?”

Cole realized he had zoned out. “Yeah. Sorry.” His gaze strayed to Jace. Then Mira.

“We can save them,” Hunter reminded him. “Focus on that.”

“Right.”

“Did you find out where Destiny went?” Dalton asked.

“She learned from Ragio that her stray power was being gathered in the echolands. So she went to the best place in the area to cross—the Temple of the Robust Sky.”

“They were collecting her power in the echolands?” Cole asked.

“A place called Deepwell in the Hundred Forests,” Hunter said. “I don’t really know the geography of the echolands. Ragio was a shapecrafter working on the project to capture Destiny’s power. He died and continued with the project as an echo. I guess Destiny’s power was the hardest to gather. They were trying to shapecraft it at Deepwell. Ragio had a change of heart and ran away. They eventually caught him and brought him to Gamat Rue.”

Cole didn’t want to ask his next question. He really didn’t. “Is Destiny in the echolands?”

“We don’t know,” Hunter said flatly. “Maybe she never crossed over. Maybe she crossed and already returned. Maybe she’s on the other side. The only way to find out is to go to the Temple of the Robust Sky. Do we still want to go after her? Things are kind of a mess after today.”

“Mira would want us to find Tessa above anything,” Cole said.

“What about Mira?” Dalton asked.

“That’s where this gets tricky,” Hunter said. “The only reason I survived the echolands version of Gamat Rue was because Nandavi was concentrating on you guys.”

And there seemed to be some other commotion. I heard people yelling about an attack at the gates.”

“Who was attacking?” Dalton asked.

“I don’t know,” Hunter said. “I was just glad the echoes seemed distracted. I focused on my conversation with Ragio. I only knew Nandavi had taken Joe, Jace, and Mira when I came out of my hiding spot and they were there.”

“You saw their echoes?” Dalton asked.

“Sure did,” Hunter replied. “While Tuto was holding our physical bodies with his weaving, Nandavi bound the echoes created when Jace, Joe, and Mira crossed over. Sando must have struck a bargain with both of them. I wish I had thought of going tangible earlier. I knew that if I returned to my body, Tuto would have me frozen again. But at a haunting ground, echoes can become physical, like Sando did. I’d never had a chance to try it, but Sando had done it, so I gave it a shot, and it worked. First I took out Tuto to free Cole. When Sando jumped back to the echolands, I followed, but Nandavi wasn’t as focused on you guys anymore. Her will was hard to resist. I barely made it back to my body.”

“They have your echo,” Cole realized.

“Yes,” Hunter said.

“What can they do with it?” Dalton asked.

“Imprison it,” Hunter said. “Or destroy it.”

“Your soul?” Dalton exclaimed.

“Not my soul,” Hunter said. “My lifespark is here in this body, or I wouldn’t be talking. My echo is a new body in the echolands. To us it seems like a ghost. They have my echo. If they destroy it, my spark would skip the echolands entirely when I die.”

“You keep calling it a spark,” Cole said.

“It’s the local lingo. Lifeforce. Soul. Spirit. Whatever. In Necronum, a lot of people call it your lifespark, including the people who trained me. Or just your spark.”

“What do we do about Mira?” Cole asked.

“Right now?” Hunter replied. “Nothing. Nandavi has my echo. I can’t risk crossing over again. I must already be imprisoned. And you guys can’t cross here. I don’t have enough weaving skill to send you.”

“Who can send us?” Cole asked.

“Our best bet is the same place Tessa went—the Temple of the Robust Sky,” Hunter said.



“That makes sense,” Cole said. “We should follow her trail.”

“Exactly,” Hunter said, looking at Cole steadily.

“That’s where I’m going,” Cole said.

Hunter patted Joe. “Our other priority is getting these bodies someplace where a more skilled weaver can put them into a stable longsleep. Until then, I have to stay with them, weaving constantly, or they could lose their connections to their lifesparks. Somebody needs to go fetch an expert weaver. I won’t be able to move them without one. If we try to haul them out of here on horseback ourselves, I’m worried the bodies will get spoiled for revival. I have a weaver in mind, in the town of Dobson. If we keep the bodies close together, I should be able to sustain them until the weaver arrives.”

“Cole and I can find the weaver,” Dalton said. “Then we can all go to the temple once they’re settled.”

Hunter watched Cole, saying nothing.

“I don’t know if we can afford the time,” Cole said. “I’ll ride ahead to the temple. Maybe you guys can follow me. Or maybe Dalton should go after Jenna.”

“Alone?” Dalton asked, his voice squeaking.

“Maybe,” Cole said. “This is falling apart.” He paused, trying to think clearly despite his anxiety. “Jenna deserves somebody to come for her. So does Tessa. Mira too. I’ll try to find Tessa. Then I’ll go after Mira. You save Jenna.”

“If you cross to find Destiny, I can’t follow,” Hunter said. “My echo is compromised. Maybe Dalton should follow you. I could go after Jenna.”

Tears clouded Cole’s vision. They weren’t for himself, though he worried it looked that way. “No,” he said. “You should go with Dalton. Stabilize the bodies, then help Jenna together. I don’t want Dalton stuck in the afterlife. If it comes to that, I’ll go alone.”

“Do you have to go after Tessa?” Dalton asked. “We could send somebody.”

“We’d have to find somebody,” Cole said. “We’d lose too much time. And we might not find the right person. If Tessa went to the echolands, I’ll go after her.” He had promised Mira he would save her little sister. His blunder had led to Mira getting taken into the echolands. The least he could do was fulfill her last wish. Maybe he could save them both. And Jace. And Joe. That possibility was the only prospect that made the pain bearable. “Then I’ll save Mira.”

“You get that Mira won’t stay here,” Hunter said, jerking his head toward the ruins.

“Well, no,” Cole replied.

“Sando is probably working for Nazeem,” Hunter said. “If so, Mira will most likely be brought to him. The same would have happened to you. The others might remain. Depends on the arrangement with Nandavi.”

Anger and fear warred inside of Cole. For the moment, anger had the upper hand. “I better go.”

“Tessa went to the temple alone,” Hunter said. “Her bodyguard didn’t survive to help her. She was only here a few weeks ago. You may not be too far behind her.”

“Got it,” Cole said. “You two can handle the bodies?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Hunter said. “When you get to the temple, insist on talking to the prelate.”

“The who?” Cole asked.

“The head cleric,” Hunter said. “The weaver in charge of the temple. Destiny would have gone to the top. In Necronum, the prelates mostly side against the High King. If I remember right, the prelate at the Temple of the Robust Sky is a woman loyal to the rebellion. I don’t recall her name.”

“Good to know,” Cole said. He knelt beside Mira, reached inside her collar, avoided Tuto’s pendant, and unclasped the slender chain he found. An engraved golden disk dangled from the chain—the royal seal. “I’ll use this to help prove whose side I’m on.”

“Should we take off Tuto’s pendants?” Dalton asked.

“Not a bad idea,” Hunter said.

Cole removed Mira’s and Joe’s pendants and chucked them into the brush. Dalton did likewise with Jace’s.

“Here’s a thought,” Hunter proposed. “Once we get the bodies settled, Dalton and I will follow you to the temple, to check what’s going on. Maybe Tessa didn’t cross. Or maybe she already crossed and came back. If she isn’t in the echolands, I can help.”

Dalton stared down at Mira. “Or both of us can help. I care about Mira too, you know. And Jace and Joe. It’s not like I want to ditch them.” He looked at Cole. “But part of me wonders if other people could help better.”

“I worry too,” Cole said. “How am I supposed to save them? But don’t forget all we’ve accomplished. And remember that getting home is a long shot. So is saving Jenna or anyone else from back home unless we help Mira defeat her dad and Nazeem.”

“He’s right,” Hunter said.

“Should I even go after Jenna?” Dalton asked.

“I think you should at least make contact,” Cole said. “She deserves to know she

isn't forgotten. You can see how well she's doing there and play it by ear."

"We'll see," Dalton said. "First things first. We'll take care of the bodies, then follow you to the temple."

Cole gave Dalton a hug. "Be safe. See you soon."

"Don't jinx us," Dalton said. "Die bravely."

Cole gave a nod, not trusting his voice.

Hunter rose and hugged him.

"You were awesome today," Cole said. "You saved us."

"You're awesome too," Hunter said. "We've got this. Go find Tessa."

Cole let go of his brother and ran down the slope toward the horses. He tried not to think about the bodies of his friends. It felt good to be moving. For now he could concentrate on getting to the temple and pretend he could outrun all that had happened today.

## CHAPTER

# 13

## TEMPLE

**D**espite having plenty of money, Cole slept on the ground and ate mostly from his provisions while traveling to the Temple of the Robust Sky. The practice freed him to stop for the night just about wherever he desired, whether or not a city was near. It also allowed him to avoid drawing attention by staying at an inn alone at his young age.

He could have made up excuses to pay for a room, but he wasn't in the mood to be around people and didn't particularly want to be comfortable. His best friends were on the brink of death. What right did he have to a soft bed and warm food? Better to get in some extra miles and hopefully make it to the temple in three days instead of four.

Throughout his lonely journey, Cole fought to ignore a host of questions. He did his best to concentrate on riding, caring for his horse, and preparing simple meals. He tried to look ahead to how he would find Tessa.

But the questions persistently leaked through his defenses. Why had he made that bargain with Sando? After accepting the deal, why hadn't he departed from the group? Why hadn't he seen the tragedy coming? Why had they trusted Tuto? Why had so many of them entered Gamat Rue? Why hadn't they at least insisted on Mira staying behind? Why had Jace and Joe volunteered to die?

He wished he could go back and make different choices. Destiny and Honor had tried to warn him! Even Sando and Tuto had offered clues! Why hadn't he seen the signs?

At his most rational, Cole knew he couldn't change what had happened. But it was hard to stay sensible. He spent long stretches of his ride stewing over the fatal mistakes that had culminated at Gamat Rue.

The Temple of the Robust Sky came into view on the third evening after leaving the ruined prison. Spired buildings loomed atop a terraced ridge, with staircases

descending to numerous gardens and smaller structures at lower elevations. A dark gray wall around the base of the modified ridge enclosed the massive complex.

Cole reached a large gate in the wall as the last embers of sunset dwindled on the horizon. The great doors stood open, but a pair of uniformed guards asked him to halt.

“Can I come in?” Cole asked.

“Riding alone?” one of the guards inquired, a bald man with a tiny mustache.

“I’m catching up to my parents,” Cole said, hoping the lie would help avoid further questions.

“Then I expect they already made your donation,” the guard said. “You’re staying the night?”

“I think so,” Cole said. “I’m not sure where to go.”

“You would be in the family dormitories,” the guard said. “North side of the temple grounds, lowest level. Your first stop should be the north stable.”

“Thanks,” Cole said.

“Proceed.” The guard waved him forward.

Cole rode through the gateway, feeling quietly pleased. He was getting better at acting casual. Jace would approve. Cole tried not to picture his friend’s lifeless body sprawled on the hillside. Too late. The image took center stage in his mind.

Cole knew he needed to emphasize the positive. Jace was an echo someplace, probably trapped, but not completely gone. There was a chance he could be restored to life.

Night deepened as Cole made his way around the long ridge toward the north side. Light seeped from windows and glowed from street lanterns, all of it dim.

Cole needed answers. What made a temple different from a shrine? This one clearly had more buildings. Could some of the people he saw be echoes? Or did that only happen in certain areas? What did it take to access the top of the ridge? Those buildings were the largest and looked the most official. How late could he go up there? Figures were still visible on the stairways and roaming the terraces.

And of course the big question for now—how could he get in front of the prelate?

Cole reached the north stable and paid to have his horse kept there for a week. The stablehand, a lanky fellow with crooked teeth, seemed friendly enough, so Cole tried to mine some information.

“This is my first time here,” Cole mentioned after paying the man. “How late is everything open?”

“Don’t you know?” the stablehand replied with a chuckle. “This is the only temple

open all hours. It's hard to stargaze in the day or watch the sun and clouds at night."

Cole nodded. The temple was named for the sky. And it covered a tall ridge. People used it like an observatory. "Is it hard to meet the prelate?"

"Elana Parson? What do you think? She oversees the whole temple. Unless she's giving a speech on a holiday, not many people see her besides the clerics."

"Makes sense," Cole said, a plan already forming. "Do you know where I could find writing supplies?"

After hearing the answer, Cole rushed off.

\* \* \*

Night had fully fallen by the time Cole climbed the stairs, a rolled message in his hand. Addressed to the Honorable Prelate of the Temple of the Robust Sky, the missive was sealed with wax bearing the imprint of the royal seal he had taken from Mira.

When Cole finally reached the ridgetop, the muscles in his legs burned. He turned, pausing to enjoy the view. From the high vantage, the horizon seemed low, opening up an unobstructed panorama of blazing stars. No moon had risen, and the dim lanterns used throughout the temple grounds created little light pollution. Not only did uncountable stars of varying brightness gleam in diverse shades, but even the luminous clouds of nebulae and the swirly smudges of galaxies stood out against the unfathomable blackness.

Cole lingered. The staggering view made him feel small and large at the same time—small because of the vastness represented by the spectacle, large because at the present moment, it was all on display for him, as if he had found the aquarium that held the universe.

"Keep moving, please," a voice prompted from behind him.

"Sorry," Cole said, turning. "It's just so spectacular."

He now faced a man in a dark robe with short blond hair. "No quarrel on that point," the man said. "But the walkways are for traveling. We have many viewing areas for stargazing."

"Maybe you can help me," Cole said. "I'm new here, and I have a message for the prelate." He held up the rolled missive but didn't offer it for examination.

The man held out a hand. "I can see that it finds her."

"Sorry," Cole said. "I'm a royal errand boy, and this carries the royal seal. I'm under orders to personally deliver it."

The man heaved a sigh that conveyed the absurdity of protocols. "Very well. Come with me. I'll introduce you to Ingrid. She has access to the prelate. No promises that you can gain audience this evening."

"As long as the prelate knows that the message came a long way," Cole said. "And that the Crown considers it a high priority."

The man gestured for Cole to follow. Cole felt he had sounded official. His brief time spent as an actual royal errand boy had given him some lingo to draw from and knowledge of certain procedures. He had an explanation ready for why he wasn't dressed in livery, but since the subject didn't come up, he didn't want to oversell his cover story.

Some of the buildings atop the ridge had no roofs. Many featured porches and balconies where people gathered to gaze heavenward.

"This is beautiful," Cole commented as they walked along.

"If you appreciate the sky, before you depart, try to take in the view from the Tower of Eternity. Many viewing areas offer generous vistas in certain directions, but only from the summit of the tower is the fullness of the firmament exposed no matter where you turn."

"Sounds incredible," Cole said sincerely.

"Normally, an appointment is required, but if the prelate appreciates your message, Ingrid could make arrangements."

They found Ingrid inside a brightly lit, windowless room within one of the larger buildings. Her brown hair was pulled back in a small, tight bun, and she wore dark robes like her colleague. Outside, Cole had thought the material was black, but now he could see it was a very dark blue.

"May I inspect the seal?" Ingrid asked after Cole explained his intention.

Cole handed over the rolled message. She took a close look.

"This comes from the High King, you say?"

"It's either his seal or his chamberlain's, I think," Cole said. Actually, he wasn't sure if Mira's seal was the same as the High King's or anybody else's, so he was trying to be vague.

"We seldom get direct messages from the High Shaper," Ingrid said. "I suppose the prelate will want to see it."

Cole held out his hand, and Ingrid returned the message. "Wait here." She left the room.

"May I be excused?" the man asked. "I have duties elsewhere."

"Sure," Cole said.

Cole waited alone for several minutes before Ingrid returned. She gave him a nod. “This way.”

Ingrid led him down some hallways with intricate carvings on the walls and stopped in front of a large door made from dark red wood. After knocking briefly, Ingrid opened it.

They stepped through the doorway into a sizable residence. The ceiling, walls, and floors were composed of dark gray stone, brightened by patterned rugs and tapestries. Some of the tables and chairs incorporated the same dark red wood as the door.

A woman sat regally in a high-backed chair facing the door. She looked stern, and a little defiant, with streaks of silver in her wavy black hair. Cole guessed she was a little older than his mom.

“Pardon the interruption, Madam Prelate,” Ingrid said. “This errand boy claims to bear a message from the High Shaper.”

“You may approach,” Elana said.

Cole noticed from the imprints on the rug that the chair had been recently repositioned. The prelate must have wanted it to feel more like he was entering a throne room. He crossed to Elana and handed her the rolled message. She inspected the seal, then stared at him.

“I’m supposed to watch you read it,” Cole said.

The prelate broke the seal and unrolled the message. Cole couldn’t see the words, but he knew what he had written.

*Dear Prelate Elana,*

*On my honor, I am looking for my destiny. The seal is royal, but not from the person you might think. It’s a miracle I’m here. Could we please speak in private? I have news, and I need information.*

*Many thanks,*

*Cole*

He had done his best to communicate indirectly in case somebody intercepted the note. But he had also wanted to make sure she would understand what he meant. He watched her scan the words.

Elana looked up from the message, her eyes first fixing on Cole, then Ingrid.

“I wish to interview this messenger in private,” Elana said.



“As you will,” Ingrid said, withdrawing from the room.

Elana’s eyes softened. “You poor boy. I’m sorry for the cold reception. The High Shaper is not a favorite of mine. I try to turn a brave face in his direction. Who are you?”

“I work with Princess Miracle,” Cole said. “We know Destiny is in trouble. We think she came here.”

“Where is Miracle?” Elana asked. “Is she well?”

“We ran into trouble,” Cole said. “Her echo was captured.”

Elana closed her eyes briefly and gripped the arms of her chair. “Dire tidings. Where will it end? Her body?”

“Other friends were stabilizing her when I left,” Cole said.

“Good news has become a rarity. I take it you want my help?”

“My mission is to find Destiny.”

Elana shook her head. “These are grim times in Necronum. Even grimmer in the echolands. You are not a weaver.”

“My shaping power is weird,” Cole said. “And damaged. But I have to help Destiny.”

“You’re so young, dear.”

“I already helped Mira get her shaping power back, and Honor, and Constance.”

“All three?” Elana asked, impressed. “And here you stand. Constance is well?”

“Last I saw,” Cole said. “Not too long ago.”

“I can see that you believe your words,” Elana said. “I also see your horrendously mangled shaping power. What happened to you?” Her concern seemed genuine.

“An evil shapecrafter attacked me. We defeated her, but my power doesn’t work anymore.”

“What a world. So harsh. So violent. You are weary. Can I offer you a refreshment?”

“I’d rather find out about Destiny. Did she come here?”

Elana gave a small nod and stood. “Follow me.”

She led him to a different room. Cole noticed a large balcony outside the room, offering a magnificent view. He wanted to go take a good look, but she turned away from the balcony, pulled back a tapestry, inserted a key, and opened a hidden door.

Cole followed Elana down a steep, winding stairwell with bright lanterns on the walls. “We’re dropping deep into the ridge to my most private chamber,” she explained. “My quarters are protected against eavesdropping, but our destination is even more secure.”

“I noticed you don’t have guards,” Cole said.

“Not all guards are visible, dearheart,” Elana replied. “Especially in Necronum.”

The observation left Cole pensive. And a little creeped out. He peered ahead and behind with greater attention. How many unseen echoes were watching him right now?

“Careful, these steps get steeper and narrower and are not entirely even,” Elana said. “They may one day be the death of me.”

Cole took her advice and stepped cautiously as the curving stairs became more precarious. By the time they reached the bottom, the temperature was much cooler. A short hall gave access to an iron door recessed in thick stone.

“Open for the prelate and her guest,” Elana demanded, and the door swung inward without her touching it.

They passed into a hall, through another door, down another long stairway, and stopped before a heavy door of dark red wood, expertly carved with a host of human faces the size of golf balls. Muttering words that Cole didn’t catch, Elana pressed two of the faces, one high on the right, the other low on the left, and twisted them in opposite directions.

The door swung open.

“After you,” Elana invited, taking a lantern from a hook on the wall.

Cole entered but stayed ready to dive backward in case she tried to slam the door behind him and lock him inside. Recent events had taught him to be a little paranoid. Instead of springing a trap, Elana followed him in and closed the door.

The same dark red wood as the door paneled the fairly large room. The lantern’s light revealed a table and chairs, a writing desk, and four cots against the far wall. Three of the cots were occupied.

“Tessa!” Cole cried in surprise, dashing forward. Tessa lay on one cot, Honor on another, Desmond on the third. Cole had recently spoken with the imprints of Honor and Tessa, but he hadn’t seen the former knight of Blackmont Castle since they had parted ways after fighting Morgassa. Their eyes were closed. They didn’t appear to breathe.

Cole turned to Elana. “Are they . . . ?”

“In longsleep,” Elana said. “Destiny came here alone, and I helped her cross over at her insistence. Imagine my surprise! I had no idea the daughters of Stafford Pemberton had survived. I assumed the rumors were idle speculation. Some days later, Honor arrived with Desmond. I helped them cross to the echolands in search of Destiny.”

Cole buried his face in his hands. Why couldn’t he get a break? They had all gone

to the echolands. If he was going to go after them, he would have to become a ghost too. The prospect made him queasy. He had secretly hoped that maybe he would find Destiny in hiding. But she and Honor were both in the same realm as Mira.

“You can’t wake them up?” Cole asked.

“Not unless their echoes return to the temple,” Elana said.

“Would you know if they returned?” Cole asked.

“That’s my job, dear,” Elana said. “I supervise the affairs of the temple on both sides.”

“Oh,” Cole said. “Any news about them?” He gestured at the bodies on the cots.

“Not since they left,” Elana replied. “I’m sorry. I know it’s distressing. I’ve been worried myself.”

Cole gazed at the still forms of Honor, Tessa, and Desmond. Was Mira resting on a similar cot somewhere? Jace? Joe? Did they look this peaceful? The daydream of them in repose on cots was much preferable to his memories of them discarded in the weeds.

“Can you send me?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Elana said hesitantly. “But *can* and *should* might be separate matters.”

“Not today,” Cole said. “I have to go after them.”

“You’ve never been to the echolands?” Elana asked.

“Never.”

“And I gather you’re new to Necronum?”

“A couple of weeks,” Cole said.

Elana wrung her hands. “I wasn’t sure whether to obey Destiny and send her. She is so little! But she has lived more years than her appearance suggests, and she described dangers too profound to ignore. Now another child wants my help to start a perilous road. You can’t possibly fathom the danger involved.”

“Story of my life since coming to the Outskirts,” Cole said. “I’m not excited to do this. I know it isn’t safe. I know I may never return. But I have to try. I promised Mira. It’s my duty.”

Placing her hands on her hips, Elana considered Cole thoughtfully. “A strong sense of purpose can go far on the other side. Still, you only get one echo, dearheart. If it perishes, you move on permanently. Worse, an echo can be captured and bound. Time works differently in the echolands. You could be imprisoned for a duration that we can’t comprehend from a mortal perspective.”

Cole didn’t like the implications. At least in a normal prison, you knew that one day death would free you. But Tessa was already facing the danger of being captured

forever. So was Mira. “You have an empty cot.”

“It’s no accident,” Elana replied. “Destiny told me that three others would come looking for her. She expressed that I needn’t bother to send additional rescuers. Honor came here with a single companion. The other fell at Gamat Rue. I assumed that Destiny had failed to predict his demise and got two rescuers instead of three. But here you are. Alone.”

Her words gave Cole tingles along his spine. It also helped strengthen his resolve. Destiny had real power. If she had seen a third person coming after her, and he had found his way here, it meant this could be part of a grand design.

“What do I need to know?” Cole asked.

“Destiny went in search of her power,” Elana said. “Besides predicting that three others would come after her, she revealed no details. Honor was searching for her sister. She didn’t disclose any specifics.”

“I think I know where Destiny was going,” Cole said.

“So did Honor,” Elana said sadly. “The echolands are in a state of turmoil not seen in many lifetimes. If not for Destiny’s prediction, I would not send you.”

“I’d just find somebody who would,” Cole said.

Elana considered him with pity. “That won’t be necessary. Are you ready to cross?”

“No point in losing more time. My brother might come along with a friend. If so, could you let them know where I went?”

“I’ll watch for them,” Elana said. “Would you please recline on the empty cot?”

Cole got settled. After sleeping on the ground for the previous several days, the simple bed felt comfy. “Any tips?”

“I’ll greet you on the other side and advise you there,” Elana said. “May I have permission to disconnect your lifespark from your corporeal body?”

Cole studied her warily. “Does that give you power to do what you want with my spark?”

“Only to send it to the echolands,” Elana said. “This being your first visit, an echo will form to house it.”

“Do I have to do anything?”

“Just grant me permission.”

Hunter had heard that Elena was one of the good guys. And she had greeted Cole harshly when she thought he represented Stafford Pemberton. That was a plus. Also, she had been watching over Destiny and Honor. He had to trust somebody and probably wouldn’t find a better candidate. “Okay. Go for it.”

A wave of energy surged through Cole, saturating him with sensation. In a single

burst he saw light, darkness, and every color of the spectrum. He smelled numerous fragrances—sharp, sweet, and foul. Diverse sounds assailed his ears—loud and quiet, jarring and melodic. He tasted sweetness, saltiness, sourness, and bitterness. Over his entire body he felt pain, pleasure, heat, cold, and a gut-clenching jolt of electricity.

The sensory overload left him shaken. He lay still, eyes closed, recovering, until a hand took his and helped him to his feet.

Elana looked the same, except her skin had a gentle glow, as if more light were striking her than anything else in the room. The chamber looked basically the same, except the stone of the walls and floor was now white, and all four cots were empty.

## CHAPTER

# 14

## DUSKDAY

Are we there?” Cole asked.

“Welcome to the echolands,” Elana said.

“You got here quickly.”

“I instructed a colleague to bring my echo to this room.”

“When?” Cole wondered.

“As we spoke.”

“With telepathy?”

“Mind to mind, yes.”

Cole shook out his arms and alternated kicking his legs. “I don’t feel different.”

“You’re still you,” Elana said. “The echolands have substance. The material here is just more refined than in the physical world you know.”

Cole nudged the cot with his toe. It felt normal. He pinched his wrist. That felt normal too. He noticed that his hands had an extra glow to them. “Am I shining?”

Elana smiled. “We’re called bright echoes when we’re still connected to a living body in the mortal world. The extra light makes us stand out a little, but also carries some advantages.” She gave a perplexed scowl. “You still have your sword.”

Cole drew his Jumping Sword. The blade had a faint gleam similar to the subtle shine of his skin. “Is that weird?”

“Duplicate versions of your clothes appear to cross over. But no other items. Not unless you’ve put some of yourself into them.”

“The sword came from Sambria,” Cole said, sheathing the blade. “I used my shaping power to make it work in Elloweer.”

“Interesting,” she said. “The action must have forged a personal bond with it. You’ll notice that not many people carry weapons in the echolands. But considering your mission, you might be happy to have one.”

“Do people get killed here?” Cole asked.

“Come with me,” Elana said, leading him from the room. The stone in the hall had also brightened from gray to white. “We’ll talk as we walk. Echoes can die. But not typically in combat. Death by physical trauma requires a lot of damage. Echoes don’t bleed. They don’t suffer from sickness or infection.”

“Is my sword useless?” Cole asked.

“Not completely,” Elana said. “In a pinch, you could hurt or kill an echo with it. But consider the weapon a last resort. You’ll find different social patterns here than in mortality. There is a camaraderie like you might expect among castaways. They’ve all left their former lives behind. They’re clinging to this phase of existence, or else they would move on. There is no shortage of food or shelter to motivate crime, and most echoes lack many of the drives and passions inherent in our physical bodies, which tends to make them gentler. How do you feel, Cole?”

Now that she mentioned it, he felt better than he had in days. “Really good, actually. I was pretty tired, but I feel refreshed.”

“The physical needs of an echo are different from a mortal body,” Elana explained. “Before you crossed over, your body was tired and hungry, but you left those needs behind. You don’t require sleep here. Or food. Or water. At least not how a physical body needs those things. You won’t age. But there are some new challenges. Your echo won’t naturally heal. And your energy can fade.” She stopped at a door. “Do you hear the music?”

Cole recalled Hunter describing the disturbing music that greeted him when he crossed over at Gamat Rue. Bowing his head, Cole listened. Barely audible, as if originating several rooms away, gentle strains reached his ears. Or was the music playing in his imagination? Long, slow, rich chords gradually evolved. No individual instruments stood out. He felt the emotion of the tune as much as he heard it. “Faintly.”

“The music is seldom softer than when you’re inside a temple,” Elana said. “Everything in the echolands has music to it. The places, the land, the vegetation, every animal, every person. Some of the music is easy to discern. Some takes great talent and practice to recognize.”

“Do I have music?” Cole asked.

“Yes, you poor boy,” Elana said, stroking his hair. “The specific music of a person can be tricky to apprehend. It takes practice. Yours is confusing and discordant.”

“Why?”

“Your shaping power is in disarray.”

“That comes through?”

Elana nodded. "Some weavers devote their entire effort to reading music. The most skilled can apprehend surprising details without ever seeing you. They can judge your mood or uncover a lie. They can also locate a person across great distances. But you don't need to worry about any of that yet. You must first learn to beware the music of the Other."

"That's what lies beyond the echolands," Cole said.

"The echolands are a way station," Elana explained. "This is only the first stage of the afterlife. None can say how many stages lie beyond. At least one. Some have taken up long-term residence here with considerable success, but they can only do so by resisting the call of the Other. The more time you spend in the echolands, the more beguiling that invitation becomes."

"Is the call quieter in the temples, like the music?" Cole asked.

"That's one advantage of the temples." Elana opened the door, revealing a staircase that wound upward. This looked different from the way they had come down. "They protect you from being summoned into the next phase of existence."

Cole followed her up the steps. "Are there tricks besides hiding in temples?"

"Don't be caught by surprise. The music of the Other tastes like home. You'll know it when you sense it. At different times, that particular music calls to different individuals at varying intensity. No other music in the echolands is as beautiful or as alluring. Eventually, it becomes irresistible. Unless you wish to move on, the music of the Other is the greatest threat in the echolands. It claims far more lives than any other hazard."

"How do I resist?" Cole asked.

"Being a bright echo helps, especially at first. You should be almost completely immune for a time. It helps to stay where the music is quieter, or in places with strong enough music to overpower the call. It helps not to stray to the fringes of the echolands. It also helps when you have reasons to remain. More than a few echoes make bargains with people in Necronum primarily to anchor themselves against the call. Of course, whenever possible, you should stay away from the channels."

"Channels?" Cole asked.

Elana shook her head. "You're so new here. So underprepared. It was criminal of me to let you cross over."

"It's not your fault. I insisted. So did Destiny. I can learn. Tell me what I need to know."

"Channels are like rivers," Elana said. "They're also unlike rivers."

"What do you mean?"



“Channels sometimes correspond to rivers and streams in physical Necronum,” she said. “But the substance flowing through them is not water. We call it ether. It moves quickly, a wild hybrid of wind, water, and music, and always flows away from the Source at the center of the echolands, out toward the fringe. The music of the ether harmonizes with the music of the Other. If it draws you in, you’ll be swept away.”

“So don’t wade in the rivers,” Cole said.

Elana smiled sadly. “That’s putting it lightly. Flowing ether is nicknamed a slipstream. If you enter, you won’t come out.”

“They all start at one place?” Cole asked.

“There is a churning fountain at the center of the echolands called the Source,” she said. “Channels of ether large and small flow away from it.”

They reached an iron door flanked by two guards in dark blue robes. Their skin didn’t glow like Elana’s. They silently opened the door and let them pass. Elana led Cole down a few corridors. They went through another door and started up another stairwell.

“Do you have normal rivers?” Cole asked.

“Water is a rare resource here,” Elana said. “Fortunately, it’s not needed. Your echo doesn’t even need air to survive.”

“I’m breathing,” Cole said.

“I breathe too,” Elana said. “And you can eat and drink, if you choose. Go ahead and try not breathing.”

Cole held his breath as they climbed the stairs. She was right. As the seconds ticked by, the need to exhale never increased.

“Weird,” he finally said.

“No harm in breathing,” Elana said. “No harm in losing the habit. Echoes who have been here for centuries do it both ways. Eating is another matter. Your echo can survive without eating, but food can be helpful, as well as subtly harmful.”

“How?” Cole asked.

“We don’t bake in the echolands. We don’t eat meat. But you will find abundant fruit and vegetables. Consuming these in moderation can help replenish your energy. It can improve focus. We don’t sleep here, but we can slide into trances. Keeping your energy up with occasional meals helps you avoid accidental trances.”

“Are the trances bad?” Cole asked.

“They can have benefits,” Elana said. “Trances rest the mind much like sleep does. They occur as you get lost in certain music. If you slip into a trance here at the temple, chances are you will simply meditate. But if you are drawn into a trance while

listening to the call of the Other, you could end up wandering off toward the fringe or into a channel.”

“How can food be harmful?”

“If you eat too much, you can become more susceptible to unwanted trances. Consume too little, and your energy can seep away with similar consequences.”

“How do you get it right?” Cole asked.

Elana gave him a pitying look. “This is one of many reasons I’m worried about you exploring this place on your own. The echolands are riddled with unique perils. It takes time to learn how to survive here.”

“Doesn’t everyone come here when they die?” Cole asked. “Aren’t people getting used to it all the time?”

“Many only visit briefly,” Elana said. “They often move on to the Other before long. There are debates regarding the purpose of the echolands. I believe they are a landscape of forgetting—a place to shake off your attachments to mortality, especially to let go of your heartaches and regrets. The more time you spend here, the more distant you will feel from your former life, causing less reluctance to proceed to the Other. If you want to last in the echolands, it takes effort. If you come here as a bright echo, once your lifeforce goes to the Other, your physical body will truly die.”

“At least this proves there’s life after death,” Cole said. “I used to worry about that a lot.”

“It’s a consolation, but beware of that mindset,” Elana said. “Accepting death can give the music of the Other extra power over you. The certainty of life after death doesn’t mean we need to rush through any of the previous phases. It’s a comfort to know the Other is there. We’ll head that way when the time comes, but why pass on before we must?”

“Makes sense,” Cole agreed. They were still going up. “Lots of stairs.”

“Are you tired?” she asked.

“Not a bit,” Cole realized.

“Physically, you could keep going forever,” Elana said. “The key is maintaining the energy of your will.”

“Tired or not, I could just get sick of climbing stairs.”

“Exactly. A strong will is your best weapon in the Outskirts. It can protect you from the Other and from those who seek to control you. Here we are!”

The stairway ended at a room with a ladder that led up to a hatch in the ceiling. Elana climbed up and opened the hatch, revealing a deep blue sky. Following her, Cole emerged onto the flat top of a lofty tower edged with low golden railings.

Cole slowly turned in a circle, trying to absorb the stunning view. It was a duskday—all horizons were aglow as if multiple suns were poised to rise, but the colors looked richer and brighter than any duskday he had seen, and the higher regions of the sky were a deep blue that seemed more appropriate for gemstones. Not a single cloud trespassed in the vivid firmament.

But the sky wasn't the most striking surprise.

Cole could hardly believe the color and beauty of the land visible in all directions—gleaming channels, lush lawns, splendid trees, colorful shrubs, and abundant flowers all vied for attention. Only some scattered boulders and buildings lacked vegetation. He saw no empty dirt and no dead plants. For miles around, the terrain appeared immaculately landscaped.

He glanced between the sky and the ground. The glorious horizon shed a warm, even light from all directions, virtually eliminating shadow. The vibrant colors reminded Cole of something. . . .

It came to him in a flash. The Red Road at the Lost Palace! After he crossed into Trillian the torivor's prison, the Red Road had seemed redder than any red he had ever witnessed. The colors arrayed before him had that same quality—bluer than blue, greener than green, whiter than white. They were the familiar colors he knew, but intensified to a degree that he had not known was possible.

"It's paradise," Cole marveled.

"More or less," Elana said. "It's inarguably beautiful."

"Shouldn't it be nighttime?" Cole asked.

"It's always like this here," Elana said. "No sun in the sky. No moon, no stars. Just an endless duskday."

"How do you keep track of time?" Cole wondered.

"When you crossed over, you took a big step away from time and toward eternity," Elana said. "Time is chiefly relevant in the echolands as it pertains to the physical Outskirts."

"How do you make appointments?" Cole asked.

Elana laughed, and there was music in it, a light melody Cole felt more than heard. "That can be a problem. There are still some elements of time. At the temples, for example, we use hourglasses to stay aware of the time in Necronum. We don't have sunrise, or sunset, or seasons. Nothing really ages or dies, except for the occasional new fruit or plant growing to replace something that was removed. But feelings and attitudes still change. And people grow more susceptible to the music of the Other. Wherever you can find change, there are elements of time."

“Too deep for me,” Cole said. “How do I know when to eat?”

“Eat when your energy gets low,” Elana said. “One item is usually enough—an apple or a carrot. Avoid eating for the pleasure of it. Eat to replenish.”

Cole looked down on the other brilliant white buildings and spires of the temple. No other structure rose high enough to obstruct their view of the sky or the landscape. “Is this the Tower of Eternity?”

“Yes,” Elana said. “I have visited the other temples, and this is my favorite place in any of them.”

“The echolands are big,” Cole said, scanning the horizon and trying to imagine what lay beyond.

“Much bigger than Necronum,” Elana said. “The echolands stretch on and on, with no known end, though if you venture too far from the Source, you will probably not return.”

“Do you eventually reach the Other?” Cole asked.

She shrugged. “Could be. None who got near enough to know have returned to tell. And nobody has deciphered any clues in the music.”

“I think I heard your music when you laughed,” Cole said.

“That could be,” Elana said. “Yours became more fluid when you first gazed at our surroundings. Cole, I hate to pry, but I wish you would tell me where you are going. I could at least steer you in the proper direction.”

Cole considered her offer. He would have to ask directions from somebody. He should be able to trust Elana more than some stranger. “Will you keep it a secret?”

She gave a knowing smile. “You want a pledge from me? Are you sure you’re new to Necronum?”

“I’ve already been burned.”

“I hope it served as a learning experience. I will not share your secret, if that is your wish.”

“It’s called Deepwell. In the Hundred Forests.”

By the way she inhaled, Cole could tell it wasn’t good. “I see.”

“Scary?”

“Unsafe,” Elana said. “There are regions in the echolands where the music becomes . . . unsavory. Like the discord of your mangled power. Gamat Rue is such a place. Some of these tormented locations are ancient. An alarming amount are new. Deepwell is such a place. We blame the followers of a new power in the echolands. A power that recently assumed a name.”

“Nazeem,” Cole whispered.

“Speak of him sparingly, even in the safety of a temple,” Elana said. “I have feared he might be involved with the princesses.”

“He taught the people who stole their abilities,” Cole said. “His followers want to take control of their shaping powers.”

“They practice a strange art that predates weaving or shaping as we know it.”

“They call it shapecraft.”

“It threatens the very fabric of our reality,” Elana said. “Should this art continue to spread, I’m not sure the Outskirts will survive.”

“He plans to escape his prison soon,” Cole said.

“Where did you hear this?”

“I snuck into a secret meeting of shapecrafters.”

Genuine fear filled her eyes. “How?”

“In Junction,” Cole said. “Long story.”

“Did he know?”

Cole nodded. “He’s after me.”

She raised her fist to her mouth and bit her knuckle. “He is like no power we have known. You should not have come here, Cole. I should return you to your body and you should get far from Necronum.”

Cole tried not to let her concern become contagious. He already knew Nazeem was dangerous. “I have to find Destiny. She told you three people would come after her. Our enemy wants her power. I have to find her first.”

“What if he already has her?” Elana asked.

“Then I have to save her.”

“Such courage,” she murmured. It sounded less like a compliment and more like she pitied him. “What is to be done? I’m tempted to offer you a guide, but I’m unsure who I can fully trust, and I worry about tampering with Destiny’s instructions. Her gift is authentic.”

“Just show me the right direction,” Cole said.

She pointed into the distance. “That way. It can be difficult to stay oriented. You’ll need help. You did well playing a messenger. I take it you actually are a royal errand boy?”

“The Unseen helped me become an errand boy to meet the queen,” Cole said. “How could you tell?”

“Lies are conspicuous in the echolands,” Elana said. “They come through as disharmony in your music. I only caught the smallest whiff of falsehood when you delivered your message to me. It was so faint that I dismissed it as accidental. You

really were an errand boy. The message really had a royal seal. And you were confident that Princess Miracle would have wanted you to reach me. Your ruse worked. So you will deliver a message for me.”

“Okay,” Cole said. “Do I get a horse?”

Elana gave a small frown. For a moment, Cole caught the bittersweet music of the emotion. “You have so much to learn. Animals seldom dwell for long in the echolands. They swiftly move on to the Other. They can’t be compelled to remain. Only a very special bond will keep an animal in the echolands, usually associated with a specific companion.”

“Everybody just walks?”

“Almost all of us. Some clever weavers have designed alternate means of transportation. And a few echoes have animal companions. The lack of mounts makes long-distance travel a chore. Or so I understand. I’ve never tried it. Let’s make this official. I hereby commission you as an errand boy of this temple. I will give you a message to deliver to Lottie Natt of the Sweet Channel Charnel House. It is the most reputable destination near the Hundred Forests. This way you can ask for directions without appearing to look for Deepwell. Once you find Lottie, you can get her advice on reaching your actual destination. The message will introduce you to her and urge her to offer assistance. She is an old friend.”

“That’s a great idea,” Cole said.

“I’ll place a weaving on the message that should help mask your personal music. Many will be searching for you. The weaving will help protect you from all but the most careful scrutiny. When you reach Lottie, she can give you an even more disruptive talisman. Such items are a specialty of hers. I’ll solicit one for you in the message.”

“Thank you so much,” Cole said.

Elana took his hands in hers. “I wish I could do more. My heart aches to think of the danger you will face. You have a mission, Cole. At this moment, you see it clearly. Fight to maintain that clarity. You must succeed. Survive for those you need to help. Survive for the good of all the Outskirts. Survive to return to your loved ones. Hold true.”

“I will,” Cole said.

“Echoes may try to trick you into deals. Make no bargains. Never surrender your will. That may sound easy now, but it can get complicated. Cling to your duties, Cole. They can save you. Cling to life.”

Her earnestness was a little unnerving. “Okay.”

“As you travel the echolands, heed the music. It can serve as a compass, guiding you to comfort and companionship and warning you away from danger. Whenever possible, avoid music that makes you uncomfortable. The only alluring music you must shun is the call of the Other. You will know that song when you hear it.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “We all know it. The call feels like home, and an end to everything else. You won’t go because you’re deceived. When we move on, we go willingly.”

“That’s almost scarier,” Cole said.

“Exactly right.”

CHAPTER  
— 15 —  
ECHOLANDS

**B**eyond the temple walls, Cole experienced the music of the echolands unmuted. Throughout his life, during movies or on audio devices, he had listened to music that conveyed certain emotions—sadness or excitement or anger. But here the emotional nuances came through much more precisely, sometimes ahead of the audible cues.

Cole couldn't discern individual instruments in the music, and it was hard to pick out melodies that he could hum, but the enchanting euphony brought profound feelings of refreshment, tranquility, wonder, and grandeur. Outside the gates, the music specific to the temple also gained clarity. Though wordless, it sounded more like human voices than the other music around him, transmitting a sense of importance and solemnity.

Some other echoes came and went from the gate, a couple of them bright. None showed particular interest in Cole. As he moved away from the temple, he soon found himself walking alone.

Cole knew that danger awaited him. The beauty around him concealed hidden perils. But as he marched across the springy grass, enveloped by sublime music, he couldn't suppress his high spirits. This wilderness looked like what gardens aspired to be but never quite achieved. The uniformly green turf would be the envy of the most exclusive golf course. Shrubs, flowers, and trees were artfully grouped, all their blossoms in full bloom, every color resplendent beyond description. There were no dead branches, no fallen leaves. Nothing was wilting or drying out. Everything in view was gloriously thriving.

The farther he hiked, the more Cole felt like he was on a stroll in the world's largest and most immaculate park. Despite plentiful groves of trees and extensive flower beds, with a little zigzagging he never had to leave the flawless grass. No natural wilderness could feel this orderly. Wherever he looked, Cole found ideal spots to spread out a quilt and enjoy a picnic lunch. He had a hazardous mission to fulfill.



Destiny, Honor, and Mira were in trouble. But it required effort to sulk when everything looked and sounded so heavenly. Whenever he let his guard down, feelings of serenity and wonder soothed his heart.

Cole didn't want to get too relaxed. He needed to stay ready. No matter how pretty the echolands were, no matter how inspiring the music felt, Sando was out there somewhere, along with other servants of Nazeem. Cole drew his Jumping Sword but soon felt ridiculous. What was he going to stab? The tree with the gorgeous apples? The enormous rosebushes? There was nothing to fight. Not even weeds.

Though constant, the music stopped short of becoming intrusive. As he grew used to the complex harmonies, they receded into the background, though certain details came through more clearly if he paid deliberate attention. When Cole paused to admire a field ablaze with wildflowers, the gentle music specific to the flowers became more prominent. Apparently, in the echolands you didn't just stop and smell the roses—you could listen to them as well.

The temple shrank in the distance. Soon Cole found he could only hear its music if he stared at it and focused. It was strange how the level of his attention altered the volume. He experimented with emphasizing certain trees, or a hill, along with just soaking in the broader soundscape.

He began to notice the absence of animals. Cole had journeyed a lot in the Outskirts, and there were always insects buzzing, little critters rustling in the brush, birds on limbs or in the sky, and occasional larger beasts spotted from a distance. But here there was no animal life—no birds, no rodents, no bugs. The companionship of the music helped mask their absence, but the lack of other people and animals started to make the breathtaking beauty seem a little more sinister. There was a difference between an enormous beautiful garden and an enormous beautiful *deserted* garden.

Everywhere except right by the gate to the temple, Cole also found no roads or paths. Before he departed, Elana had mentioned the general lack of roads. Without horses, carts, wild animals, or many traveling echoes, how could trails form? Since the landscape tended to be easy to cross, the sparse travelers weren't funneled along a particular route.

Having too many convenient, grassy ways he could turn became a problem. Cole tried to watch landmarks to keep his path straight, but once the temple was out of view, the task got more difficult. He hoped he wasn't curving away from the direction Elana had indicated.

The temperature remained the kind of comfortable that drew little attention. Not too hot, not too cold, no breeze. Ideal for walking. Or sitting. Or hiking forever.

It took some time for Cole to really grasp that the day was never going to end. All horizons shed their constant light. No cloud intruded on the empty sky. Hills and groves and fields came and went. He knew he had gone farther than he had ever walked all at once. Some instinct kept suggesting he should find a place to make camp, but that impulse came from habit rather than exhaustion. His mind felt clear, his muscles unfatigued. The changing sights coupled with the stirring music kept boredom away. And the light never dimmed.

So he walked. And walked. And walked.

Only when Cole saw an elderly woman in the distance did he alter his pace, slowing almost to a stop. The woman saw him as well and veered away. Apparently, she didn't want company. He supposed that made sense, since he was a stranger.

After seeing the woman, Cole felt more alert. Had he been slipping into a trance? If so, it hadn't been hard to snap out of it when the woman came into view. Maybe his mind had just been relaxing.

He had grown accustomed to the harmonies and emotions of the forests and fields, but from up ahead, he heard something new—rushing, whistling music like an orchestrated windstorm. Curious, Cole quickened his pace in that direction.

Coming over a shallow rise, he got his first close look at a channel. The strange river looked like dense, silver mist whipping along at the speed of a gale. As he focused on the ether, the symphonic whistling drowned out the rest of the music around him.

Cole hurried to the bank of the channel. The slipstream was broad enough that only his best throw would put a stone across it. As Cole studied the rushing current up close, he found streaks of every shade of gray between brilliant white and deepest black.

He felt tempted to crouch down and touch the rapidly flowing surface. Would the ether feel wet or windy? More like a waterfall or a tornado? How high would it spray if his hand interrupted the flow? But he recalled being warned that if he fell in, he would be swept away to the Other, so he decided against experimentation.

When Elana had told him there were infrequent paths in the echolands, she had also informed him there were many bridges over the channels. Looking left and right, Cole saw no sign of a bridge. But while his gaze lingered to the left, Cole thought he caught a hint of some unusual though not unpleasant music, so he set off in that direction.

Cole stayed away from the brink of the channel as he walked but felt invigorated by the hustle and fury of its spirited music. Eventually, the other music he had heard

became clearer, conveying a sense of safety.

Soon a white stone bridge came into view, spanning the channel in a single broad arch. As Cole approached the bridge, he saw a man standing off to one side, toward the center of the span, peering over the edge at the frantic slipstream below.

On the older side of middle-aged, the man was fairly tall, with a long face and the rugged overalls of a farmer. As Cole started across the bridge, the man edged closer to the low railing at the edge of the span, eyes downward.

Curious what exactly the man might be staring at besides the slipstream, Cole sidled up to him. Gazing down with blank eyes and slack features, the man began to tip forward. Cole grabbed his overalls and yanked him back from the edge.

The man jerked, glanced down at Cole without recognition, then hastily checked his surroundings. Stepping away from Cole, he brushed at his overalls. "Thank you, young man," he mumbled absently. "Don't know what came over me."

"You were staring over the side," Cole said. "You started to lean like you were going to tip."

"I suppose I must have," he replied, seeming flustered and embarrassed. "Can't be too careful about the homesong."

Looking over the side, Cole listened to the whistling music. "That sounds like home to you?"

The man gave a soft chuckle. "New to the echolands, are you?"

"Pretty new."

"I can see the glow on you," the man said. "Hard to hear the homesong at first. Especially as a tourist. Slipstream just sounds like a pretty blizzard."

Cole thought that was a good description. "Were you in a trance?"

The man put his hands on his waist. "I suppose so. I've been trying to hold out until my youngest brother comes across. Been coming to listen by the channel more and more the last while. Woke up on the bridge not too long ago. I was alone that time. Here I am again."

"Maybe you should stay away from the channel," Cole suggested.

Hooking his thumbs in his pockets, the man squinted at the countryside beyond the bridge. "I could maybe last a bit longer if I went far away. Someplace loud. But I'm expecting my brother in yonder township any day now. I don't want to wander off too far. When I'm alone, I hear the call wherever I go. That's how Ainsley, my wife, got before she moved on."

"Your wife already . . . ?"

"We were here together a good spell. She started getting dreamy. I don't blame

her. Hard not to around here. I blame myself. I got distracted with word of Hank about to cross and lost track of her. Off she went. And now I catch myself lingering by the slipstream.”

“I’m sorry about your wife. Isn’t it dangerous to hang around here if you want to see your brother? Don’t you want to wait for him?”

“Mostly I do. In theory, yes. Be good to see Hank. Show him around. But this place . . . I don’t know, young man. A body couldn’t rightly demand more beauty, but it’s not really a place for living. Take my meaning?”

“I think so.”

The man smiled. “I’m Clint.”

“Bryant,” Cole said, using his middle name.

“Thanks for tugging me back,” Clint said. “Just prolonging the inevitable, I expect, but it was a neighborly gesture. I would have gone in headfirst without a helping hand.”

“No problem,” Cole said.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what brings a live boy your age to a place like this?”

“I’m delivering a message from the Temple of the Robust Sky,” Cole said.

Clint shook his head. “Wicked if you ask me, sending a young person to a place like this. Piece of free advice—deliver your message and get out. You have a body on the other side? Go use it. Save this place for when the time comes. It’s meant to be temporary. You don’t want the homesong to claim you before your time. And you don’t want to get comfortable here. I haven’t met a single soul who makes a career living here that seems right in the head.”

“Thanks,” Cole said.

“I mean no offense,” the man added. “You hauled me back from the plunge. Just returning the favor. Know where you’re going?”

“I’m trying to find the Sweet Channel Charnel House. Sort of near the Hundred Forests.”

Clint puckered his face in thought. “Don’t know those names. Might be far off. Can you hear the township?”

Cole listened. He mostly heard the bridge and the slipstream, along with a little of the countryside beyond. “Not really.”

The man extended an arm. “That way. You’ll hear it when you leave this ruckus behind. Somebody in the township can steer you.”

“Do you want to come with me?” Cole asked.

Clint gave a nod and started walking toward the far side of the bridge. Cole joined

him.

“It’s just a matter of time,” Clint said.

“What?”

“Before I move on. Nothing wrong with taking the next step. This place is just an echo of really living.”

“I guess that explains the name.”

Clint frowned. “It’s no place to live. I don’t know how much longer I can hold on.”

“But you want to see your brother.”

Clint rubbed his nose. “Yes and no. What kind of welcome is diving in the slipstream? My days are numbered. Might be kinder just to let him hear about it. Less dramatic.”

They reached the far side of the bridge and started walking on grass again. A grove of tall trees with coppery bark and purple leaves sang off to one side.

“Won’t he be sad you didn’t wait?” Cole asked.

“Hank’ll want to see me, sure. But I’m afraid I won’t be good company. Might be best to meet up in the Other. I wouldn’t mind seeing how Ainsley is getting on.”

Cole wasn’t sure what to tell him.

“Know what, Bryant? You go on ahead. Being in town makes me itchy of late. I’m going to sit a spell.”

Cole hesitated. “What about—”

Clint held up a hand. “I’m not saying I’m going for a swim. I make no pledge that I won’t, either.” He sat down on the grass, knees bent. “I just want to turn a few things over in my mind. You did a good deed. I was lost in the homesong, sure enough. You pulled me back in case I wasn’t in my right mind. I thank you for the courtesy. People move on from this place all the time, son. You did your part. Run on ahead now.”

Cole still wasn’t certain what to do. “Are you sure?”

Clint gave a small smile. “You’re very new here. Make every stranger with an ear for the homesong your burden, and that message may never get delivered. I’m in my right mind. No trance. I have no current plan to ride the channel. I just need to sit a spell. Maybe I’ll listen a bit and head back to town. I’ve done it before.”

“All right,” Cole said.

“Head between those hills,” Clint said, extending an arm. “Can’t miss it.”

Looking that way, Cole heard hints of new music. “Okay. Bye.”

Clint gave an acknowledging grunt.

Cole started walking. He checked over his shoulder a few times. Clint still sat

there, hands on his knees, gazing out over the channel.

As Cole went up the shoulder of the hill, he glanced back again to see Clint stepping up onto the railing of the bridge. He must have started moving just after Cole last glanced back. The distance made the man less than an inch high. Panicked, Cole considered the distance. Was there any chance he could make it back in time?

“Clint!” Cole called.

Eyes on the slipstream, Clint lifted his arms above his head.

Cole dashed toward the bridge.

Clint toppled forward into the ether. When he hit the surface, a brief, yearning melody tugged at Cole’s heart. Then the tune was gone.

Clint’s body rushed along the channel at a good pace, but not as quickly as the slipstream seemed to flow. Still, there was no chance of catching up to him from where Cole stood. Clint wasn’t struggling. In a few moments the man passed out of view.

Cole stared at the channel, an empty feeling in his gut. Should he have tried to drag Clint back to town? How could he have done it? Clint was a lot bigger than him. And he had acted intent on staying.

Cole reminded himself that Clint was already dead. Who knew how long he had been in the echolands? He probably missed his wife.

One thing Cole now knew for sure—the call of the Other was real and deadly. He might not hear it yet, but he would need to keep his guard up. There was a lot of living he hoped to do before leaping into a slipstream.

## CHAPTER — 16 —

# FOLLOWED

**G**olden ivy smothered the houses in the little town, and bright gardens bloomed on the rooftops. The playful, welcoming music set Cole at ease. If the music could be trusted, he figured this should be a good place to ask for directions.

Narrow roads crisscrossed the town. The people on the streets meandered and conversed. Nobody drove a cart or manned a stand or carried a load or hammered a nail.

It didn't take long for Cole to notice a sizable crowd around one of the larger homes. He went to see what was happening.

At the edge of the crowd a balding man with a bulbous nose and a saggy gut came up to Cole. "What's your interest, tourist?" he accused.

"Just curious," Cole said, keeping his tone light and friendly. "What's going on?"

The man folded his arms. "Fun to come see the real echoes in action?"

"Lay off, Stu," a woman scolded. "He's a kid."

"All the more reason he belongs back in the real world," Stu said.

"The echolands are just as real," the woman said.

A cheer went up from the group.

"What happened?" Cole asked the woman.

"A fellow just crossed over," she said.

"To stay," Stu grumbled. "Not a vacation."

"Hank?" Cole asked.

"I think that was the name," the woman said.

"Yes," Stu said. "Hank Groat. How'd you know?"

Cole winced. "His brother just jumped into the channel."

Head pivoting, Stu searched the crowd. "Clint's not here?"

"It was Clint," Cole said.

Stu gave a scathing laugh. “I bet you loved that! Little tourist gets to watch the echo ride the slipstream?”

Cole didn’t appreciate his tone. “I found him on the bridge and pulled him back before he went over the side. He told me to go on to town. He insisted. When I looked back, he . . .” Cole found the words too hard to say.

The woman pushed Stu in the chest. “Shame on you. Look at the boy! He didn’t take it lightly.”

Cole tried his best not to cry. Echoes might not have blood, but he could feel they had tears. He managed to keep his from spilling down his cheeks.

Stu heaved a sigh. “Happens sometimes. People take the plunge right before a loved one comes across.”

“That’s right,” the woman said. “Clint had been dwelling on the homesong for a good while. And his wife went not too long ago.”

The crowd shifted to accommodate a moving center of attention. Stretching tall, Stu craned to see. “You got me gabbing and now I’m missing the brother.” He shouldered his way closer to the center.

“How’d you know he was coming?” Cole asked.

“In a slow death, the music can signal a new arrival well before the end,” the woman said.

“Why so many people?” Cole asked.

The woman smiled incredulously. “Why attend a funeral? Or a birthday? We all lived in Weatherby. Friends, relatives, acquaintances. I never knew Hank well, but his sweet mother was a friend, on the other side and here as well. Several boys in that home. Five or six. Don’t know how she did it.”

“Have you been here long?” Cole asked.

“Longer than most in town,” the woman said. “The homesong still doesn’t hold much appeal. I’m Nina.”

“Bryant.”

“Do you live near Weatherby?”

“No, I’m passing through.”

“What prompts a healthy young man to roam the echolands?”

“I’m a messenger for the Temple of the Robust Sky.”

“I see,” Nina said. “Is the message for anybody hereabouts?”

“No,” Cole said. “I’m looking for the Sweet Channel Charnel House, near the Hundred Forests.”

“Never been friendly with geography, even in Necronum,” Nina said. “Less here.”



But Lister will know.”

“Would you introduce me?”

“Why not? Wait here.”

She walked away. The crowd was moving down the street, presumably with Hank at the center. Cole couldn't get a good look at him.

As he watched the crowd progress along the street, Cole noticed a woman staring at him. She was not older than thirty, with Asian features. She stood off to the side of the group, near the corner of a house. When his eyes met hers, she glanced away and stepped out of view.

He suddenly felt on edge. Had he caught a jangle of unsettling music? Or were his instincts just warning him that she had glanced away too quickly and slid out of view too smoothly?

“This is Lister,” Nina said from behind him, making Cole whirl in alarm.

An older man with a bushy gray mustache stood beside Nina. “Feeling jumpy?” Lister asked.

“A lady was staring at me,” Cole said.

“We don't get many strangers,” Nina said. “Especially not young ones, and especially not tourists. I'm sure more than one person was looking your way.”

Cole didn't want to elaborate that something about her had felt suspicious.

“You're looking for the Hundred Forests?” Lister asked.

“And the Sweet Channel Charnel House,” Cole said.

“You have a long way to go,” Lister said. He pointed. “Leave town going that direction.”

“Do you travel much?” Cole asked.

“More than some,” Lister said. “Less than others. You're new to the echolands?”

“Pretty new,” Cole admitted.

“Staying oriented can be a pain,” Lister said. “Helps if you know what to listen for. The sound of the Source, of course, and the direction the channels are flowing. The music of the standard landmarks. Some study of maps doesn't hurt. It takes time to learn to navigate these parts. Some never get the hang of it.”

Cole mimicked where Lister had pointed. It was not the way he would have instinctively headed. “That way.”

“That's right. Until you gain some experience, listen for towns and keep asking.”

“Are there many towns?” Cole asked.

“Enough,” Lister said. “Just don't hop into any channels or follow unpleasant music. Hunger and exposure can't touch you here.”

“Thanks,” Cole said, starting down the street in the general direction Lister had indicated.

“You’re welcome,” Lister said.

“Go in peace,” Nina added.

Cole glanced past them to where the Asian woman had disappeared. He saw no sign of her. But he didn’t think it would be a bad idea to hurry out of town.

\* \* \*

Cole glanced back several times after leaving the town. Each time he was greeted by a vacant, beautiful landscape. Could those idyllic shrubs and groves be hiding enemies? The music of the town faded until he could no longer detect it even when he strained.

Long after he no longer heard the town, Cole looked back and saw a figure coming his way across a long stretch of vivid grass. The sight startled him. It was clearly the Asian woman from the town.

She didn’t try to hide when he looked her way, so Cole waited for her. She didn’t speed up but came straight toward him.

“Hello,” Cole said once she was about fifteen paces away. “Why are you following me?”

“You’re interesting,” the woman said, still closing the distance.

“Why?” Cole asked. She was now less than ten paces away. He couldn’t sense her music, but Cole didn’t have a good feeling about her.

“We seldom get travelers,” the woman said. “The echolands can be dull that way.”

When she was five paces away, Cole set a hand on the hilt of his sword. “That’s close enough.”

She stopped and grinned. She wore a gray dress topped by a red shawl. “Do you greet everyone while touching your sword?”

“You were watching me back in town.”

“You’re a stranger,” she said.

“So why follow me?”

Her smile held little warmth. “Maybe I’m lonely.”

“I don’t think so.”

The smile faltered. “Where are you going?”

“I’m a messenger.”

“With a message that masks your music?” she asked innocently.

Cole wasn’t sure how to respond.

“You should come with me,” she said, and Cole caught a hint of chilling music.

“Who are you?”

“Call me Keko,” she said. She held out a hand. “Take my hand, and I’ll reveal your fortune.”

Cole drew his sword. “Leave me alone, lady.”

Keko pouted. “This is not how to make new friends.”

Cole felt awkward. Keko appeared to be unarmed and had made no aggressive moves. But he knew she was up to something. “Please leave me alone.”

“You’re that boy Nazeem wants,” Keko said.

Cole gave no reply.

Keko giggled. “It’s all over your face, and it just peeked through in your music. The message is well done, by the way. Excellent weaving. If you want to survive out here, you’re going to need my help.”

Cole started walking backward. “I’d rather be alone.” He couldn’t ignore the scary impression from when he first noticed her staring at him, or the hint of menacing music he had recently heard and felt.

“What if I want to go the same way you’re going?” Keko asked, walking to stay near him.

“I’ll pick a new direction,” Cole said.

Keko produced a small carved piece of wood about the size of a pencil. “Take this. It will help you on your journey.”

“No thanks.”

She tossed it to him, and he knocked it aside with his blade.

“How rude!” Keko huffed.

“Stop following me,” Cole said.

“They’ll nab you without my help.”

“I bet they’ll catch me even faster with your help. Are you honestly telling me you want to protect me?”

“From them,” Keko said.

“Only so you can catch me,” Cole said.

She gave a little shrug. “I’d love to travel with you.”

“To Nazeem,” Cole said. “I get it.” He swished his sword through the air a couple of times and backed up some more. “Have you heard the one about the echo with no arms and no legs stranded in the wilderness?”

Keko stopped walking. Her face contorted in outrage. “Are you threatening me?”

“Lady, you started it,” Cole said. “Go away.”

She made complicated gestures and started muttering. Cole heard her chilling music more clearly, and suddenly, his arms wouldn't move. His feet felt rooted to the ground. He managed to keep holding his sword.

Fingers making spidery motions, Keko drew closer, chanting under her breath.

Panic threatened to turn his mind blank. Cole resisted and tried to think. This reminded him of being immobilized at Gamat Rue, except he didn't feel as tightly held. He could pivot at the waist and move his head and eyes. Most of his muscles could flex to some degree, but his arms and legs remained locked in position.

Keko was almost close enough to reach out and touch him. His arms trembled. He could feel the invisible hold weakening, his arms and legs twitching a little more with each effort. Growling, he bent his arm at the elbow, and suddenly, he was free. Cole swung his sword at Keko. She lunged away just in time.

Cole didn't pursue her. "Do that again and I really will attack."

Keko glared at him, panting. "You're not worth the trouble."

She turned and started walking back toward the township. Cole watched her go with mixed feelings. It was a relief that she was leaving, but what if she returned with reinforcements? Should he chase her? What would he do if he caught her?

"Keko," Cole called, trotting after her. "Promise me you won't come after me."

"I owe you no pledge," she said without looking back, and he felt another hint of her unnerving music.

"But I want one," Cole said.

"You go your way. I'll go mine."

He stopped chasing her. He couldn't chop her with his sword. Not with her walking away. He turned and walked at his fastest pace.

For the next long while, Cole kept checking behind him, but he saw nobody. The music of the gorgeous landscape eventually helped calm him. Maybe Keko was really gone.

He didn't like how she was able to partially freeze him. What had made him vulnerable to her? Had he accidentally made some kind of bargain? Or was that kind of attack just part of life in the echolands?

Cole had been walking for some time when he noticed ominous music up ahead to the right. It sounded a little discordant and made him feel upset, like after losing an argument he should have won. Cole curved far enough out of the way that he never saw what the music represented, but he was glad to leave it behind. He had encountered enough trouble for one day. Of course, you could cram a lot into a day when it never ended.

A large hill rose into view as Cole walked toward it. Covered in waist-high ferns, it didn't look hard to climb, and Cole thought it might give him a chance to study his surroundings. The summit was easily the highest point in sight.

The lush ferns on the hill parted easily for him, gently brushing his legs and waist as he plodded upward. The climb required him to be more careful with his footing but didn't tire him more than anything else.

When he reached the top, Cole took in the panorama of grassland, flowering fields, stands of trees, and a distant channel crossing his path. Staring back the way he had come, he felt a jolt of panic when he noticed a distant figure following him. As he scanned the area, Cole began to notice other figures—eight total. Two traveled alone. The others moved in pairs. The nearest had to be twenty or thirty minutes away. They were fanned out behind him and off to either side. All were coming his way.

Cole took off down the far side of the hill at a sprint. Scanning up ahead, he noticed no other people. But additional enemies could be hiding almost anywhere. There was plenty of cover. Halfway down the hillside, Cole tripped and fell flat, sliding a good distance over crushed ferns.

After scrambling to his feet, Cole kept up his quick pace. He hadn't run in the echolands before now. He found that though he could remain at a sprint without tiring, his mind became a little foggy, and the music started to sound slightly out of tune.

Not only was he not panting, but he experimented with holding his breath and found that breathing was still not necessary. He remembered Keko breathing heavily after he broke free of her control. That might have been a response to a different kind of exertion.

Cole ran into a grove of plum trees and yanked a piece of fruit from a limb without breaking stride. It looked perfect—no wormholes or signs of decay. He hadn't eaten anything in the echolands yet.

He bit into the tender, juicy flesh, and flavor flooded into his mouth, accompanied by a surge of exhilarating music. His senses enlivened, Cole took another bite and soon finished the delicious treat.

By the time he tossed the pit aside, Cole felt largely replenished. His focus was sharp again, and the music sounded clear. He kept running, reminding himself that if he started to feel unfocused again, he would need to eat something.

Should he have attacked Keko? Maybe. His pursuers were probably working with her. So many were converging that she must have contacted them. And that meant more were probably on the way.

What if they could all immobilize him as Keko had? What if some were more powerful than her? Even if they weren't, Cole knew he wouldn't be able to resist so many.

He drew his sword. The blade glowed with a soft light. He hadn't tried using his power here. What if being an echo helped him rekindle his abilities?

Searching inside, Cole couldn't feel his power. Undaunted, he pointed the Jumping Sword up ahead and shouted, "Away!" The sword offered no forward tug. He tried a few more times with no result.

Why couldn't he access his ability? It was there someplace. He had used it when touching the Founding Stone. If only he could use his sword to bound across the echolands, Keko and her friends would have no chance of catching him.

Cole wondered if they had spied him on the hilltop. Since he had seen them, the reverse was probably true. At least one of them must have spotted him. None had appeared to be running. If he kept a good pace, maybe he could outdistance them through sheer willpower.

Or maybe they hadn't run because others were up ahead.

The thought made him slow to a jog. Were they driving him toward danger? Was he being corralled? Would it be smarter to hide and hope they passed him by? Keko had sensed the message that cloaked his music. If he hid, would she lead everyone right to him?

Cole passed groves of trees and some lower hills. He stayed away from high ground for fear of being spotted. He vigilantly did his best to look and listen in all directions.

He saw no people. It became hard to gauge how long he had been running. The sky remained the same. Landmarks came and went.

From up ahead, he heard the whistling music of a slipstream. He listened for a bridge but didn't hear one. When the channel came into view, there was no bridge in sight. This slipstream was narrower than the other channel, but Cole's best jump would barely get him a third of the way across the skinniest stretch he saw.

Once again Cole looked inside for his power. The Jumping Sword could save him if he got it working. The power was in him somewhere, blocked, hibernating. There had to be a way to awaken it. Unfortunately, he had no idea how to even try. Searching intently in his desperation, he still perceived no hint of his ability.

As Cole drew near the channel, he pointed the Jumping Sword at the far side. "Away!" he cried, to no avail. He mustered all his need, all his will. "Away!" The sword did not react. His efforts amounted to nothing more than heartfelt wishes.

Cole reached the streaming ether and strained his ears for music like he had heard at the previous bridge. Sensing nothing, he turned right, running hard.

After a few minutes he heard the reassuring sound of a bridge ahead. The welcome music cheered him onward.

When he finally saw the bridge, four people were waiting for him. They stood on the near side of the span. Looking back and off to the side, Cole saw another five people run into view, including Keko. Legs pumping, she grinned wildly.

Cole drew his sword.

As Keko and her friends closed on him, Cole ended up with his back to the slipstream and a semicircle of enemies confronting him—five men and four women. “Put the sword down, kid,” Keko said.

Cole shook his head. “Back off, guys. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“We don’t mind if you try,” one of the men said.

Cole glanced over his shoulder at the blurred rush of the slipstream. “Might be better to just take a dive,” he said, hoping to stall them.

Several of the people began gesturing, and Cole couldn’t move. This time his attempted struggles did nothing. His toes, his head, his eyes—everything was firmly locked in place.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Keko said. “You can’t get away. You may as well come quietly.”

Cole couldn’t move his lips to reply. He was out of options. He had already failed! Maybe if he played along he could eventually find a chance to escape.

“Free his head,” Keko said.

Once again Cole could move his eyes and his lips. “You’re making a big mistake. You should let me go.”

The man who had spoken earlier held a finger to his lips. Everyone fell silent. At first Cole heard nothing. Then came the distant drumming of galloping hooves. A whinny reached them, just loud and shrill enough to be heard above the nearby music.

Several of the people exchanged glances and started muttering.

“Is it . . . ?”

“Couldn’t be.”

“What do we do?”

Keko waved her arms. “Stay calm!” She neither looked nor sounded calm.

The pounding hooves came rapidly closer. Cole began to hear thrilling music, evoking a potent blend of excitement and danger.

Keko’s companions stopped making gestures and chanting. Most of them

scattered. Cole found he could move again.

And then the horse burst into view. The enormous steed had a coat like thunderclouds. Whether it was the way the muscles rippled as the horse ran, or how the hair caught the light, the coloring of the coat seemed to be in motion, highlights shifting like smoke in the wind.

“Good luck!” Keko shrieked at Cole as she ran off to one side.

The thrilling music surged as the horse chased the fleeing echoes, running them down with ease. The animal bumped a woman into the slipstream and trampled two men. The echoes fled in all directions.

Cole gaped at the rampaging steed. Could it be the same horse that had helped him back in Necronum? What could it be doing here in the echolands? Might there be a team of horses mysteriously on his side?

The horse did not pursue all the fleeing echoes. As they got farther away and spread out wider, the horse circled back to Cole. He sheathed his sword.

The horse came and stood before him. Cole’s head was lower than its back. Even with the horse up close and standing still, its hair flowed and swirled like churning clouds. The large head bent down to Cole and nudged him with its nose.

Cole hesitantly petted it.

The horse nudged him again, then turned sideways.

Was he supposed to get on?

There were no reins, no saddle. How was he supposed to ride a horse so mighty and fierce without any equipment? How was he even supposed to climb up?

As if reading his mind, the steed crouched. Cole saw that some of the fleeing echoes had slowed and were looking back at him.

Cole swallowed. This was his only chance. Stretching to grip the black mane in one hand, Cole jumped and pulled and managed to swing a leg over the top. The horse straightened, and Cole found himself sitting much higher than he ever had astride a horse, legs forced wide by the broad back. He stroked the horse’s meaty neck. The coat felt soft and smooth beneath his palm.

The horse trotted away from the slipstream. A trot was typically a bouncy gait, but this horse made it feel like gentle rocking. The animal turned and charged the channel. Made breathless by the sudden acceleration, Cole squeezed with his knees and gripped the silky mane with both hands.

Was the horse insane?

They cleared the channel in a fluid leap that temporarily made Cole feel he had mounted Pegasus. Air rushed over him, and his stomach tingled. The landing hardly



jounced Cole, and at a full gallop the powerful horse felt unbelievably stable beneath him, bobbing mildly.

Glancing back, Cole watched the channel rapidly recede and saw Keko and her friends beyond it. Ahead, more paradisiacal gardens awaited.

“Where are we going?” Cole wondered aloud.

The horse just kept running.

## CHAPTER

# 17

## HALL OF GLORY

Cole had galloped on a horse before but felt sure he had never gone half this fast. It was as though he had only driven go-carts, and suddenly, he had a sports car. No, a bullet bike.

Except he wasn't really driving.

This was more of a levcar experience.

With a lot more wind in his face.

Where had this horse come from? Where was it taking him? When a similar steed had rescued him in Necronum, Cole had suspected it might have been sent by Sando. If so, he could be in serious trouble. Was it possible that Sando wanted to free Cole from Keko so he could catch him personally?

Wherever the huge, powerful animal was taking him, there wasn't much Cole could do about it. If the horse bucked or reared, Cole would go flying. To jump off at this speed would be suicide, and the horse never slowed.

"I'm trying to go to the Hundred Forests," Cole exclaimed. "To the Sweet Channel Charnel House."

The horse gave no indication of hearing him and didn't change course. If they were going in the wrong direction, Cole would have a lot of ground to make up. At least he hadn't been captured. That was something.

Cole held on and tried to enjoy the ride. The exhilarating music of the tireless horse gave him hope that it meant no harm. Judging by what he heard and felt, the horse might not be safe, but it also didn't feel evil. Nothing in the music suggested that anybody was controlling it. One of the main emotions that came across was fierce independence.

"Thanks for rescuing me," Cole said. "I don't know if you can understand, but I appreciate it."

The horse gave no response.

“Can I call you Thunder?” Cole asked. “You look like a storm cloud.”

The horse raised no objection.

They galloped onward. Forests and fields came and went. Hills rose into view only to shrink behind them. Cole occasionally glimpsed towns and villages. He caught distant fragments of unusual music both pleasant and threatening. They crossed several channels, jumping the narrow ones, using bridges when the slipstreams were too broad, always at a relentless gallop.

When Thunder finally slowed, it took Cole by surprise. He had grown used to the rhythm of the hoofbeats, the steady wind in his face, and the vegetation blurring by.

The horse came to a stop. Cole patted the muscular neck. “Do you need food?”

Thunder gave no answer.

“Is this where I get off?”

Thunder snorted, head bobbing.

Cole slid off to the ground, stumbling because of the height of the drop. Thunder took a couple of steps away, looked back, whickered softly, then stormed off.

“Thank you!” Cole called.

As usual, Thunder made no reply.

Cole watched the horse until it galloped out of view. As Thunder’s music faded, Cole noticed other unusual music, like the fanfare he might hear at the start of a big event or perhaps announcing the arrival of royalty. The bold music promised splendor and spectacle and called strongly to his sense of adventure.

He paused. Could it be the homesong? Elana had told him he would know the call of the Other when he heard it. This music didn’t feel like leaving the world behind, nor did it make him feel entranced. He could go toward or away from it as he chose. The music was about participating in the world, not leaving it.

Unsure which direction would take him toward the Hundred Forests, Cole followed the grand music. The clearer the music became, the more he wanted to participate in whatever was going on. It was the most appealing music he had heard in the echolands so far. He started to run for fear of what he might otherwise miss.

As he came around a stand of tall trees, a sprawling building appeared, filling most of the valley before him. The white stone masonry and shining gold accents gave it the feel of a flashy mansion. Cole had seen no larger structure in his life, including the First Castle, as well as shopping malls back home. Ranging from a couple stories to several stories tall, the irregular monstrosity just kept going and going, as if an architect had designed the biggest building ever and then added several other huge

buildings for good measure, connecting everything with walls and walkways and courtyards.

Cole jogged down into the valley, heading for a large set of golden doors. A pair of soldiers stood out front, a man and a woman, dressed in showy golden breastplates and helmets, each holding a spear. Cole slowed as he reached the steps leading up to the doors. The powerfully built guards stared out beyond him. The exciting music blared louder than ever.

“Can I come in?” Cole called.

The female guard looked down at him. “You hear the music.”

Cole chuckled. Her comment seemed like a joke because it was so loud. “Hard to miss.”

“To those who hear it,” the male guard replied. “Enter, friend.”

Cole climbed the steps and paused at the doors. Both guards stood much taller than him. “You have weapons,” he said.

“Such is our honor,” the female replied firmly.

“What is this place?” Cole asked.

“Its music tells the tale better than any name,” the male said. “Most call it the Hall of Glory. You are young and bright to hear its song.” He saluted with his spear.

“Is my sword a problem?” Cole asked.

The female grinned. “It’s an endorsement. Wear it well.”

One of the two doors stood a little ajar. “Thanks,” Cole said, and pushed through.

The music and feel inside were completely different from outside, the brash fanfare giving way to calm, soothing tones. He entered a vast chamber with a high ceiling of stained glass. A fountain bubbled in the center of the room—an obvious luxury in a land with little water. Soft snatches of conversation rebounded in the cavernous space. Men and women mingled in diverse attire—some dressed like knights, others in fine clothes or more common outfits. He saw one man wearing a dark blue United States military uniform.

A gentleman in a white wig and tricornered hat wandered up to Cole. He removed his hat and bowed. “Hamilton Hayes, at your service,” the man said. “What brings a young, bright echo to our hall?”

“The music,” Cole said. “And I’m looking for directions.”

Hamilton gave an easy chuckle. “You’ve come to the right place, my boy. I don’t know much about the local geography, but the combined knowledge of those assembled here could map out more than one world for you. Somebody will know.”

“Who comes here?” Cole asked.

“You already know the answer,” Hamilton said. “Those who hear the clarion call of glory. The boldest and most heroic men and women, whose hearts are acquainted with passion and sacrifice.”

“Not everybody hears the music of this place?” Cole asked.

The man gave a little frown. “Many are quite deaf to it, I’m afraid.” Then he smiled and clapped Cole on the shoulder. “But others hear the summons loud and clear. Count yourself fortunate to stand among them. There is an entire wing of Vikings who believe this is their final destination. A rowdy but jovial crowd.”

“Where are you from?” Cole asked.

“I hail from Virginia,” the man answered.

“America?” Cole asked.

“You know it? I had you pegged as a local—Necronum or Elloweer.”

“I came from Arizona.”

The man chuckled. “I’ve heard of it, though it was not a state in my day. To think our modest colonies expanded from ocean to ocean! You will find folk from various worlds here. The echolands are a crossroads.” Hamilton tipped his hat forward and wandered off.

Cole watched him walk away. How long had that guy been here? Since Colonial times? Cole wanted to ask more questions, but Hamilton seemed to be on his way somewhere.

Cole started roaming. All the rooms were beautiful. Many were enormous. The more Cole paid attention, the more he found little rooms and yards hidden here and there. Most rooms had sparse furnishings, but some of the smaller ones were cozier. Many rooms had tables set out with fruit and vegetables on them. Cole found greenhouses and lush, open-air courtyards.

The diversity of echoes continued to impress. Cole could have been behind the scenes at a movie studio where a variety of period films were simultaneously in production. Rugged mountain men chatted with Romans in togas. Primitively dressed tribesmen walked alongside military nurses. Some outfits looked completely foreign. A few echoes had the heads of wolves or cats.

Down one hall Cole spotted a short echo with grasshopper legs and translucent wings. Thinking of Twitch, Cole ran to catch up.

“Excuse me,” Cole said when he got close.

The slender man turned. “What is it?” He sounded defensive.

“You’re one of the grinaldi!”

The man blinked. “Are you also from the Ellowine wetlands?”

“No, but I’m friends with one of your people. Twitch.”

The man appeared thoughtful. “I’m not familiar with the name. Might be from before my time. I died a short while ago in the Battle of Kasori.”

“When the swamp people took over?” Cole asked.

“No, lad, when the Halfknight helped us reclaim our villages.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “You met the Halfknight? Then you must have met Twitch. He would have brought the Halfknight to Kasori. I was with him when he met Minimus.”

Realization dawned on the man’s face. “You mean Ruben,” he said. “Twitch must be a nickname.”

“That’s right,” Cole said. “He got Twitch from the Sky Raiders.”

The man shook Cole’s hand. “I’m Zig. Any friend of Ruben’s is a friend of mine. He and Minimus saved us!”

“Tell me what happened,” Cole said eagerly. “I never heard.”

Zig smiled warmly. “It was beautiful. You’ve heard of Renford and the swamp folk?”

“The basics,” Cole said. “They defeated your champions, took over your villages, and managed them poorly.”

“It was a grim day when that scoundrel came to town,” Zig mourned. “He and his lot kept inventing new ways to degrade our community. Good fields went to waste, productive livestock were mismanaged, stores we had built up over years were raided, and our people were basically enslaved. It was horrible.”

“But Twitch came. I mean Ruben.”

“Twitch will serve, if that’s how you know him. He shows up unannounced one day with a tiny knight claiming to be the champion of Wenachi, the one grinaldi village too remote to earn the attention of the swamp folk. The grinaldi are not large in stature, but this knight in full armor was at least a head shorter than all but our children. Imagine our surprise when he marches up to Renford and challenges him for the championship.”

“Renford was champion of all your neighboring villages,” Cole recalled. “If Minimus beat him, you were all free.”

“Aye, that was the notion,” Zig said. “I heard Renford talking before the duel. He didn’t like the high quality of the Halfknight’s armor. His own equipment was mismatched and incomplete. But he was confident that his size would take the day. Was he ever wrong!”

“Minimus won?” Cole asked.

“Handily! The fight ended almost before it began. Quick and bloody. Renford

hardly knew what hit him. It was almost enough to make a man pity the brute.”

“You mentioned a battle,” Cole said.

Zig gave an uneasy chuckle. “The swamp folk had made themselves quite comfortable. They weren’t ready to quit the good life over trifles like fair play and honor. Renford’s cousin immediately challenged Minimus to a duel.”

“That was against the rules,” Cole said.

“You bet it was!” Zig exclaimed. “Since Renford justified his first challenge by claiming to be champion of the swamp folk, Minimus had not only won control of our villages but was champion of the swampies as well.”

“Did Minimus accept the challenge?”

“The little knight dispatched the challenger as swiftly as he killed his cousin,” Zig said with a giggle. “As the Halfknight wiped the gore from his sword, he invited other challengers to apply. The silence was deafening. With their two top fighters dead in the mud, bested without inconvenience, nobody was in a rush to volunteer.”

“I can imagine,” Cole said. “I’ve seen Minimus in action.”

“When nobody stepped up, Minimus ordered them to return to the swamp and to never again set foot on grinaldi property. Some of the older ones conferred, and then they all attacked.”

“You were right,” Cole said angrily. “No honor.”

“Most of them rushed Minimus,” Zig said. “They would have had better luck leaping into the mouth of a volcano. All who charged him were just lining up for the slaughter. There was a terrible beauty to it—that tiny knight tirelessly carving up so many villains twice his size. Of course, not every swampie went for Minimus. Some attacked the nearest grinaldi.”

“Is that how you got killed?” Cole asked.

“We hopped away at first, mostly avoiding them. Twitch rallied us. He charged into battle boldly, cutting down Renford’s younger brother. With Minimus dispatching them so readily, they were distracted and off-balance. We wiped them out. Three of the grinaldi fell, and a half dozen were wounded. Renford’s father got me from behind with a hoe.”

Cole winced. “I’m sorry.”

Zig shook his head. “Don’t be. I was avenged many times over. It was a glorious day. We worked for generations to build those communities. The swamp folk had stolen everything. We had no hope for the future. But we got it back. My wife and children will have the lives I hoped for them.”

That pricked Cole’s heart. “You’re a good man.”

Zig smiled, eyes twinkling. “I must have done my part if they let me in here. I didn’t die immediately. I lived to get word that Minimus had purged the other villages of any lingering swampies. Your friend Twitch survived without a scratch. There was no hope in sight, lad, then all of a sudden the world was set aright. Goes to show you—never give up.”

“I guess it does,” Cole said.

“I would have rather lived,” Zig said wistfully. “I had plenty of good years left in me. But what we were doing before Minimus came to our rescue was not living. Given that we drove the swamp folk away, I wouldn’t change a thing.” He looked around. “I had no suspicion that a place like this might await me.”

“It’s amazing,” Cole agreed.

Zig looked Cole up and down. “You’ve got a glow to you, lad. You in love or something?”

Cole laughed. “My body isn’t dead yet.”

“You’re fooling me,” Zig cried. “Then how are you here?”

“It’s part of the weaving they do in Necronum,” Cole said.

“I never heard of such a thing,” Zig said. “Nor have I seen an echo with your particular . . . sheen. But I’m new here. Plenty to learn.”

“Thanks for telling me about Twitch,” Cole said. “I’m sorry you got killed.”

Zig waved it off. “Don’t mourn for me. The rest of my kin will be along in due time. It’s the one certainty. We’re all headed this way sooner or later. It’s not so intimidating once it happens.”

“I’ll see you around.”

Zig gave a little bow and moved on.

Folding his arms, Cole leaned up against a wall. It was good to hear that Twitch had succeeded in his quest to save his people. Just knowing his friend was out there someplace, having achieved what once seemed like an impossible goal, gave Cole hope and motivation.

The Hall of Glory was a big place full of diverse people. Surely he could find somebody to steer him in the right direction.



# CHAPTER — 18 —

## GUIDANCE

As Cole continued to wander, he began to realize that bright echoes must not visit the Hall of Glory very often. Not only did he get a lot of stares, but several echoes approached to ask his business. He stuck with his story of being a messenger and fished for information about where he could find the Hundred Forests. None of the echoes who approached him knew the geography of the echolands well enough to help.

While strolling past a glass wall that looked out on a modest orchard, Cole noticed a man with bushy gray sideburns roaming the grassy area. Not immediately seeing a way into the courtyard, Cole rapped on the window until he caught the man's attention. It was Durny—the old shaper who had bought him for the Sky Raiders and who had protected Mira until getting killed by an enormous spider at the proving grounds.

When he recognized Cole, Durny first looked stunned, then delighted. He gestured to the right and hustled that way himself. Durny had lost his limp but wore the same shirt, jacket, and trousers from the day he died.

“Look at you!” Durny exclaimed when they met at the door. He stepped inside, shook one of Cole's hands with both of his, then pulled him into a hug. “We meet again! You're bright, aren't you?”

“Yeah,” Cole said. “Still alive.”

“How is Mira?”

Cole looked around. “Can we talk here?”

“Come into the courtyard,” Durny said, leading Cole under the shade of the fruit trees. “This entire compound is shielded from outside scrutiny, but out here we won't risk other guests of the hall eavesdropping.”

“Mira's in the echolands,” Cole said. “Not dead. Her body is in longsleep. An echo captured her.”

“Oh no. What about her power?”

“She got it back.”

“Outstanding,” Durny enthused. “That could not have been easy. But now she’s in trouble. You’re looking for her?”

“And her sister Destiny,” Cole said.

Durny placed a hand on Cole’s shoulder. “I’m deeply impressed, Cole. You promised me you would take care of her. You’ve clearly taken that vow seriously.”

“I’m trying,” Cole said. “Honor is somewhere in the echolands too.”

Durny gave a slow nod. “Three of the five trapped in the afterlife.”

“I want to save them,” Cole said. “Last we knew, Destiny was heading to a place called Deepwell in the Hundred Forests. I’m trying to get there, but I’m on my own.”

Durny rubbed his chin. “I don’t know the lay of the land here. Some in the Hall of Glory could help us. Most are more familiar with places besides the echolands.”

“How come?”

“When I died, I found myself traveling along a white, misty passage. From off to one side I heard this bombastic music. Following it, I entered the echolands near the Hall of Glory, and the bombast lured me inside. I haven’t left. The vast majority of those who come to the Hall of Glory make their way directly here and never depart to explore. Word has it this is the safest, most comfortable haven in the echolands. For those who decide to move on, there is a channel nearby. Tell me all you know about Miracle and her sisters.”

Cole related how Sando had tricked him and the suspicion that he was working for Nazeem. He summed up how he and his friends had previously helped Honor and Constance and shared what he knew about Destiny.

Durny listened solemnly. When Cole finished, the old man folded his arms and stared at the ground. “I may not know my way around the echolands. But I might know just the man to help you.”

“Really?”

“He can be fickle. But I expect this scenario will intrigue him. He’s one of the few who comes and goes around here. Something of a folk hero. He should be able to steer you right.”

“Can we tell him everything?”

“I talk to him about Stafford and the princesses all the time. He works with the Unseen. He’s as reliable an ally as you’re likely to find. He’s been my best source of news. I already knew Nazeem was searching intently for Tessa, for example. But I didn’t know about Mira and Honor crossing into the echolands.”

“Where can we find your friend?”

“Come with me.”

\* \* \*

Cole waited outside a door while Durny checked with his contact. After a few minutes Durny came and retrieved Cole. He followed the old shaper into the room.

Two men awaited them. A handsomely dressed man sat in a red leather chair. A stockier, balding man perched off to the side on a stool.

Cole recognized the man in the chair! His clothes were different from during their previous encounter, but the rings and cape looked the same. His face appeared a little older, but his carefully shaped beard remained black. “Harvan Kane!” Cole exclaimed.

Harvan grinned. “Always a thrill to meet an admirer. And you are?”

“Cole Randolph.”

Harvan bowed his head in greeting. “All those stories you’ve heard about me? Understatements.”

Cole couldn’t help laughing at the casual cockiness. “We’ve met.”

“Have we?” Harvan asked, squinting. “Set aside the message, Cole, I can barely get a read on you.”

Cole glanced at Durny, who held out a hand. Cole passed him the message, and Durny set it on a table. Now Harvan would be able to hear his actual music.

“I’m normally good with faces,” Harvan apologized, one dark eyebrow raised.

“We met indirectly,” Cole said. “In the Cave of Memory.”

“Ah,” Harvan said. “My imprint. Was I helpful?”

“You were guarding a secret,” Cole said. “I was there looking for somebody else.”

Harvan rubbed the dense, sculpted fur on his chin. “I remember the secret. I hoped my imprint would protect it. How’d I do?”

“You told me nothing,” Cole said.

Harvan pumped a fist. “More than a hundred years later, still going strong.”

“Although you let him know you had a secret,” the guy on the stool pointed out. “That’s only one step away from revealing it.”

“We all have secrets,” Harvan replied dismissively. “Especially anyone in that cave.” He jerked a thumb at the man on the stool. “This is Winston. On a good day, he’s more useful than annoying. I was a capable weaver in my time, but he’s the better weaver in the echolands.”

Winston folded his hands on one knee. “And why is that?”

Harvan shrugged and shared an uncomfortable smile. "Because I can barely weave anymore."

"Barely?" Winston inquired.

"Not at all, really," Harvan admitted.

"My power is blocked too," Cole sympathized.

Harvan squinted at him. "Blocked? More like destroyed!" He glanced at Winston. "You ever see such a mess?"

"It's not pretty," Winston said.

"How'd you manage that?" Harvan asked Cole.

Cole glanced at Durny. "Can I talk in here?"

"Speak freely," Harvan said. "Nobody can spy on us. Winston sees to that."

Durny gave a nod.

"I fought a shapemaker named Morgassa who was terrorizing Elloweer," Cole said. "She attacked my power as we defeated her."

Harvan laughed and smiled, rubbing his hands briskly. "My kind of guy! See what I mean, Winston? You haven't really taken a stand until you get your hands dirty. The kid has battle scars."

"I'm sure you can provide him with more," Winston replied dryly.

"Maybe," Harvan said with a chuckle. He refocused on Cole. "I'm to believe you've met four of the Pemberton girls?"

"Miracle, Honor, and Constance," Cole said. "I helped all of them regain their powers. I've only met Destiny's imprint."

Harvan leaned forward. "Your music sounds truthful, and I have an ear for it. Winston?"

"Agreed."

"This guy vouches for you too," Harvan went on, jerking his chin toward Durny. "You want directions to the Hundred Forests? You're hoping to catch up with Destiny?"

"Yeah," Cole said. "Do you know how to get there?"

Harvan rolled his eyes. "Cole? Please."

"Does that mean you do?" Cole said.

"He doesn't know the stories," Winston said.

"Stories?" Cole asked.

"He's arguably the greatest explorer the Outskirts has known," Durny explained. "Harvan Kane stories have expanded into folk tales."

"They haven't grown that much," Harvan protested.

“You had others write your autobiography so they could embellish,” Winston said.

“It’s tedious to transcribe events you lived,” Harvan said. “Writing produces grotesque oversimplification. The verbal history has been accurate enough.”

“The one about Mount Fairview?” Winston prompted.

“The highest peak in Sambria,” Harvan said. “I reached the summit.”

“Defeating an army of yetis?” Winston pressed.

“There were yetis,” Harvan maintained. “They tried to kill me. Avoiding is basically defeating.”

“With a magical spear?” Winston pursued innocently.

“I found a spear,” Harvan asserted. “Some details improve with any retelling.”

“The one about the witch?” Winston went on.

“Enchantress, witch,” Harvan said. “She had powers.”

“Turned you into a frog, did she?” Winston asked.

“I had huge warts,” Harvan said. “And I couldn’t speak.”

Winston shook his head.

“Harvan’s renown is well deserved,” Durny inserted. “He was a legitimate hero, or he wouldn’t be in the Hall of Glory. And unlike many, he continues to explore here in the echolands.”

“This is just my base of operations,” Harvan said. “I interact with a few of the top Unseen weavers. I know quite a bit about the Pembertons. I’m concerned about this new fellow, Nazeem.”

“I think he’s been around for a very long time,” Cole said.

“So it seems,” Harvan said. “But his name has only recently surfaced. He remains shrouded in mystery.”

“I met him,” Cole said.

Harvan’s jaw dropped, and he stared with undisguised astonishment. “In the flesh?”

“I snuck into a secret meeting beneath the First Castle,” Cole said. “Nazeem used the Founding Stone to communicate with his followers. He was speaking from the Fallen Temple.”

“There have been theories . . . ,” Winston mused.

“The Fallen Temple?” Harvan checked. “You know this for certain?”

“I was in the meeting when Nazeem spoke,” Cole said. “He noticed me. Now he’s hunting me.”

Harvan covered his mouth. “You’re the boy in the recent reports. Yes, you match the description. No wonder he wants you. Cole, nobody knows Nazeem resides in the Fallen Temple. In Necronum and the echolands, we all keep our distance from that

accursed place. For centuries, nobody has laid eyes on the temple and survived to tell the tale.”

Cole held up a finger. “People have been there. They just know how to keep a secret.”

“What people?” Harvan asked, almost hesitantly.

“Owandell, for one,” Cole said.

Bringing his fists to his temples, Harvan reeled in his seat, as if Cole had struck him. “I feared as much. What do you know of the shapecrafters?”

“Nazeem taught Owandell shapecraft,” Cole said. “The shapecrafters all follow Nazeem.”

Grimacing, Harvan nodded. “Owandell used shapecraft to strip the princesses of their abilities and empower Stafford.”

“Right,” Cole said. “Now Owandell and his followers expect Nazeem to return. Nazeem acted like it would happen soon.”

Harvan slackened, his eyes gazing vacantly. “Funny how some mistakes never stop haunting you.”

“What mistakes?” Cole asked.

Winston shook his head. “We can discuss other—”

Harvan held up a hand. “No. The boy is embroiled in this. Like so many others, he is paying for my faults. He deserves to hear it.”

Cole listened.

“I knew Owandell. Long ago. He was a companion on several of the adventures toward the end of my mortal life. We became friends. Younger than me, he was smart, fearless, and full of ambition. I should have heeded the warning signs.”

“You couldn’t have known—” Winston began.

Harvan held up a hand again. “We shared some similarities. Both of us wanted to go places nobody had ventured. We wanted to behold unexplored regions of the five kingdoms. But while I avoided the known strongholds of great evil, he displayed an unhealthy interest in them. I could never tell him enough about the Lost Palace, the Forsaken City, or the Fallen Temple.”

“I went to the Lost Palace to rescue Honor,” Cole said.

“Nobly done,” Harvan said. “You were fortunate to escape with your life and your sanity. Would you have gone there out of curiosity?”

“No,” Cole said.

“This is where you and Owandell differ,” Harvan said. “And where I am unlike him as well. He was absolutely fascinated by knowledge and power, regardless of the

source. His own shaping abilities were nothing extraordinary, but his ambition knew no boundaries. He was very patient. Despite many hints of his true character, I didn't take him seriously until it was too late."

"What happened?" Cole asked.

Harvan heaved a remorseful sigh. "Though most of my explorations happened in the physical Outskirts, I was a weaver. Over time, Owandell showed increased interest in mapping the echolands. At first we crossed over together, but my primary interests involved exploring the physical world. I figured I would have time to explore the echolands after I crossed over."

"Sounds like you have," Cole said.

"More than most," Harvan said. "Owandell, however, remained intent on mapping the echolands as a bright echo. Due to his persistence, I eventually let him cross alone while others watched over his body in longsleep. He undertook several such journeys. I was courting a magnificent woman at the time, the Grand Shaper Denshi Ridal. I had resisted marriage for years, but her charms overwhelmed me. I was utterly distracted, and for the first time, seriously considering an end to my bachelorhood."

Harvan covered his eyes with his hands but kept speaking. "The day after Owandell returned from a lengthy trip to the echolands, Denshi lost her shaping powers. She came to me, blaming Owandell. In her sleep, she had felt his violent presence, and she awoke with her shaping disabled. There was no hard proof, and Owandell gave a virtuoso performance of baffled innocence. I honestly believed there had to be some other explanation."

Harvan uncovered his eyes. Tears shone in them. "I went to the Cave of Memory. I spoke with one of the ancient Grand Shapers and learned that on rare occasions, individuals had developed the ability to shape the shaping power, always after a trip to the echolands."

"Was that your secret?" Cole asked.

"A grave one at the time," Harvan said. "Nobody in my day had considered the possibility of altering the shaping power. Such attempts could undermine the very fabric of the Outskirts. Over the years, the Grand Shapers had succeeded in quietly eliminating those with such abilities for the public good."

"That must be why the latest shapecrafters stayed so secretive," Cole said. "They had been wiped out before. Nazeem would have known that."

Harvan let out a bitter chuckle. "You're not slow, kid. I began to examine Owandell's fascination with the arcane in a new light. His recent visits to the afterlife became a cause for real concern. If he represented the rebirth of this ability to reshape

shaping, he would have indeed had the power to strip Denshi of her abilities. The imprint of the Grand Shaper I spoke with could offer no alternate explanations.”

“What happened?” Cole asked.

“I should have gone straight after Owandell,” Harvan said, teeth gritted. “I should have attacked out of hiding. I also should have warned others, but the Grand Shaper in the cave really wanted to keep the possibility of tampering with the shaping power a secret. In the end, I was overconfident.”

“You’re admitting to hubris?” Winston exclaimed. “Can I get that in writing?”

“Anybody can make a mistake once,” Harvan said with a faint smile.

“Got it,” Winston said. “Your one mistake ever.”

Harvan waved away his reaction. “I went straight to Denshi and told her all I had learned. She was so happy I finally believed her. Owandell had gone into hiding, but we started planning how to flush him out and deal with him. Little did we know he had poisoned our supper.”

“Really?” Cole exclaimed.

Harvan smiled ruefully. “That was our last night in mortality. But it gets worse. Owandell had used my time away to prepare. Not only did he assassinate both of us, but he had weavers lined up who bound and imprisoned our echoes.”

“No way,” Cole said. It was too terrible to be true.

“Some lessons come at great cost,” Harvan said. “I wasn’t kept with Denshi. I didn’t escape for over fifty years. It took outside aid. By the time I was free, Owandell had helped Stafford steal his daughters’ powers and fake their deaths. I started working with the Unseen, and I searched for Denshi. Before I could find her, another freed her, and she went straight to a slipstream. I couldn’t blame her, but I was devastated. I spent some time in the Hall of Glory trying to recover. I considered moving on, but felt I had introduced too much evil to the world to leave before the situation was resolved. Instead, the horizon continues to darken.”

“I’ve seen evidence of that,” Cole said.

Harvan studied Cole, then glanced at Durny. “Please keep the end of my life a secret. Very few know the full story.”

“Others might tell it and triple the heroics,” Winston said.

Harvan glared at the man on the stool.

“Sorry,” Winston said. “I know the rule. No joking about your death.”

“It’s a horrible story,” Cole said.

Harvan grinned. “The price of fame. Gripping stories and a painful life go hand in hand. Enough about me.”



“Is it ever enough?” Winston asked.

“Enough for now,” Harvan said.

“I need to get to Deepwell,” Cole said. “You can give me directions?”

“Directions aren’t much use in the echolands,” Harvan said. “Especially if you’re untrained in the music. You’re new here. Fresh and bright. Can you even hear the call of the Other?”

“Not really,” Cole admitted.

“How about the Source?” Harvan checked.

“I don’t think so.”

“He heard the song of glory,” Winston noted.

“Which makes him cool,” Harvan said. “We get very few bright echoes here. But it doesn’t mean he can navigate the endless garden.”

“Heading off in the right direction would be a start,” Cole said.

“But not much of one,” Harvan said. “You’d be roaming in circles before you knew it. I mean no insult. The best of us have done it.”

“Meaning Harvan has done it,” Winston interjected.

“You’ve circled too,” Harvan shot back. “And countless otherwise brave and enterprising echoes. The misdirection creeps up on you. Look! More grass! Hey, big surprise, trees and flowers! You can pass the same location many times without realizing it. Time and practice are required to learn to keep your bearings.”

Cole felt daunted by how hopeless Harvan was making it sound. “I don’t have time to waste. At least if I start in the right direction from here, I can keep asking as I go.”

Harvan steepled his fingers, rings glittering. “Why do you wish to find Destiny Pemberton?”

“To help her get her power back,” Cole said. “I promised her sister I’d do it. The princesses are the key to the revolution.”

“Durny informed me that Honor and Miracle are in danger too,” Harvan said.

“They’re both here in the echolands,” Cole said. “Mira was captured for sure. Maybe Honor as well. Mira is probably at the Fallen Temple, or else on her way. And Nazeem thinks he’ll be free soon.”

Harvan rubbed his beard. “Could Nazeem’s physical body still be awaiting him at the Fallen Temple in mortal Necronum? It would be an unprecedented longsleep, but this guy apparently knows how to bend the rules.”

“Speculation,” Winston said.

“Durny mentioned that Sando was the echo who apprehended Mira,” Harvan said.

“That’s right,” Cole answered, the familiar nausea of guilt filling his gut.

“He’s a wily one,” Harvan said. “Been around a long time. He’s never shown any true loyalty. But he likes catering to the biggest fish. Right now that seems to be Nazeem. What do you plan to do about Mira and Honor?”

“I’ll help them next,” Cole said. “One disaster at a time.”

Laughing, Harvan looked over at Winston. “He’s the best, right?”

“Great kid,” Winston agreed.

“You have a sword,” Harvan mentioned, pointing at it.

“Jumping Sword,” Cole said. “From Sambria. I made it work in Elloweer. I think that somehow connected it to me.”

Eyebrows raised, Harvan looked at Winston. “Now do you get his music? That’s the mysterious undercurrent.”

“Yep,” Winston said.

“No wonder Nazeem wants him,” Harvan said. “No wonder they carved up his power.”

“What?” Cole asked.

“You’re aware that your power is unusual,” Harvan said.

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“It transcends normal categorization,” Harvan said. “Works in every kingdom. Challenges the established boundaries.”

“Seems that way,” Cole said.

Harvan gave a low whistle. “A sure way to attract the attention of shapecrafters. Nazeem is a lethal enemy.”

“Letting him win won’t make him less dangerous,” Cole said.

Harvan laughed and slapped his thigh, glancing at Winston again. The man on the stool gave a nod.

“Look, Cole,” Harvan said. “You know I still care deeply about events in the Outskirts. I’m partly responsible for what went wrong. I believe in the mission of the Unseen. I detest Stafford Pemberton and what he represents. You can imagine how I feel about Owandell, Nazeem, and the shapecrafters. The Pemberton daughters are probably the most valuable assets in this war. I don’t want to send you off with directions. I want to come with you. Winston too. So much depends on this mission. We’ll guide you and help you succeed.”

It was more than Cole had dared to hope. Wandering the echolands was confusing and intimidating. And being alone with so much responsibility felt terrible. He gave a relieved laugh. “Seriously?”

“You have your sword,” Harvan said, standing up. “I have my walking stick.” He

picked up a sturdy carved staff from where it leaned against the back of his chair. "It's been with me through many of my journeys, both here and during mortality."

Cole looked to Durny.

"You should absolutely use his help," Durny said. "I had hoped he might offer. Harvan can navigate the echolands better than anyone I know."

"Do you want to come too?" Cole asked.

"I would," Durny said. "But I'm also concerned about Mira. What if I start working on that problem?"

"Could be a big one," Cole said.

"All the more reason to get started," Durny said.

"Cole still hasn't officially accepted our offer," Winston pointed out.

"How about a one-day trial?" Harvan suggested.

Cole grinned. "The day never ends here."

Harvan grinned back. "Then it'll be a thorough practice run."

"I'd be glad to have your help," Cole said. "I honestly don't know if I'd make it alone. I got chased not long before coming here. A bunch of people were converging on me."

"Your message didn't conceal you?" Winston asked.

"I went through a little town to get directions," Cole said. "The message made some lady curious. She followed me out of town, figured out who I was, and then called in reinforcements."

"How many?" Harvan asked.

"About eleven," Cole said. "Maybe more."

"How'd you give them the slip?" Harvan pursued.

"No skill of mine," Cole said. "They had me pinned up against a channel. A big horse showed up and started trampling them. I rode away on it."

"A horse?" Durny asked.

"We've been hearing tales of a mystery mare," Harvan said. "No bridle or saddle. No rider. Shows up unannounced and leaves just as quickly."

"That fits," Cole said.

"You rode her?" Winston asked.

"I didn't catch her or anything," Cole clarified. "I'm no cowboy. The horse came up to me and let me climb on. Then it dropped me off not far from here."

"You're an interesting kid," Harvan said.

"That's high praise," Winston said. "He bores easily. Of course, when Harvan gets interested, violence usually follows."

“A desperate mission,” Harvan said. “The fate of the world in the balance. A hurricane of enemies swirling around us. It’s almost enough to make a guy feel alive again.”

# CHAPTER — 19 — COMPANY

Cole sat alone at a table, thumbing through an art book. The painted birds inside helped distract him from his racing thoughts.

After it had been settled that Harvan and Winston would join him, they wanted to make ready to depart. Harvan explained that he had some people in mind who might join them on their mission, and Cole waited while he went to find them. Durny left as well, hoping to locate a guide who could escort him to the Fallen Temple.

Durny returned first and sat down by Cole.

“Any luck?” Cole asked.

“Not yet,” Durny said. “Not many people leave the Hall of Glory except to ride the slipstream. And even fewer want to head toward the Fallen Temple.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll strike off on my own if necessary,” Durny said. “There are still more people I can approach, but I didn’t want to miss your departure.”

“We’re alone,” Cole said quietly. “You’re sure about Harvan?”

Durny smiled. “He likes to talk and can come across as too proud and intense. I didn’t take him seriously at first. Some people never do. But he’s the most reliable echo I’ve met. You’re in good hands.”

“Do you know the people he wants to join us?” Cole wondered.

“I’m not sure,” Durny said. “Trust his instincts. He’s your best chance.”

Before too long Harvan returned with a pair of men. One had flat features. Long black hair hung past his shoulders, with part of it rolled up at the base of his neck. He wore a loose brown robe and moccasins. The other had more conventional clothes, short hair, an average build, and a friendly bearing.

“Let me introduce a pair of echoes who didn’t live in the Outskirts during mortality,” Harvan said. “This is Drake, son of Hessit, of the Amar Kabal.” The man

with the long hair placed two fingers on his chest and gave a small bow. “And Ferrin, son of Baldor, a displacer.” The other man nodded.

“I’m Cole Randolph,” Cole said. “Son of Bryant and Elizabeth.”

“Drake and Ferrin never lived in the Outskirts,” Harvan said. “They never wandered the echolands except to come here. Neither man can have been corrupted by our enemies. Get to know them. If you’re in agreement, they’re ready to join us. Durny, would you come with me for a moment? There is somebody I want you to meet.”

“Excuse me,” Durny said, exiting with Harvan.

Cole found himself alone with the two men. “Where are you from?” he asked.

“We lived in a land called Lyrian,” Ferrin said. “We both died of the same disease. Drake caught it early, seemed cured, then suffered a fatal relapse. I came down with it late in life, and it wasted little time in destroying me.”

“What disease?” Cole asked.

“Heroism,” Ferrin said.

Cole chuckled. “I guess a lot of the people here caught it.”

“There are worse ways to go,” Drake said. “We’re all headed for the same end. I’ve died many times. There is a certain wholeness and comfort that comes from dying for what you truly feel is right.”

“Died many times?” Cole asked.

Drake rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m a seedman. My people are the Amar Kabal. When we die, a seed detaches from the back of our necks. If planted, we regrow and are reborn, along with all of our memories. The last time I regrew, my seed was deformed. And so I finally get to see the afterlife.”

“Does your echo have a seed?” Cole wondered.

“No,” Drake said. “Just a little lump where the amar should be. I’m not destined to spend multiple lifetimes here.”

Ferrin removed one of his hands, tossed it into the air, and caught it on his wrist. The hand fused back to his arm without leaving a mark. “I’m a displacer. My kind can pull ourselves apart and then put ourselves back together. My echo works the same way.”

“That’s bizarre,” Cole said.

Ferrin removed his head and held it while speaking. “I knew two kids from Earth who felt the same way. If you can get used to this, we should be fine.”

Cole stared with a mix of curiosity and horror. “I can live with it. How’d you meet kids from Earth?”

“How did you come to the Outskirts?” Ferrin replied. “There are ways between the worlds. Not many from Earth make it to Lyrian, but the two I met were outstanding people. I understand you’re not truly dead. A bright echo, they call it.”

“That’s right,” Cole said. “I still hope to make it home.”

“We want to help you,” Drake said.

“Were you and Ferrin friends in Lyrian?” Cole asked.

Ferrin and Drake glanced at each other, as if sharing a joke.

“More like mortal enemies,” Ferrin said. “Seedmen and displacers have never mixed well. But since our deaths, we’ve come to an understanding. Long story.”

“Some of our other friends came here as well,” Drake said. “There was a war. Many people died bravely. Our friends have all moved on. Ferrin and I were thinking about doing the same. But the prospect of one last adventure beforehand appeals to us.”

“You can count on us,” Ferrin asserted. “Both of us have seen our share of mayhem without losing our heads.” He placed his head back on his neck. “I could use another good deed or two before going onward to whatever comes next.”

“You know it could be dangerous,” Cole said. “Very powerful people are after me. Our echoes could get imprisoned.”

“We know the risks,” Drake said. “We’ve faced evil before.”

“Some of us may have lived in one of evil’s pleasure palaces,” Ferrin said with a crooked smile. “Or even worked for evil directly.”

“Seriously?” Cole asked.

Ferrin shrugged. “Mistakes are how we learn. Drake and I wouldn’t be here if we hadn’t decided to hold true to what we thought was right. It’s what all the echoes here have in common—they were willing to sacrifice for their beliefs. Some were even on opposing sides of the same conflict.”

“But all were striving to help others in some way,” Drake said. “I’ve investigated. Nobody got here chasing their own interests. It’s no refuge for the selfish.”

Cole thought of when he had attacked the cyclops to save Mira. Had that been his ticket into this place? Or maybe his showdowns with Carnag, Morgassa, and Roxie.

“You’re wondering how you qualified,” Ferrin said. “I can see it in your eyes. I think everyone here wonders to some degree. I did plenty of terrible things during my life. Lies, betrayals, you name it. I was a spy. It was my job. I’m proof you don’t need to be perfect to hear the hero’s music.”

“You’ve risked your life for a good cause?” Drake asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“That seems to be the ticket inside,” Drake said.

“And it’s why you can trust us,” Ferrin said. “We’ve proven we know how to stick to our word, or we wouldn’t be here. And we give our word that your cause is our cause. Harvan explained about Stafford and Nazeem. We’ll stand with you against them.”

For a moment Cole caught a hint of thrilling music. He sensed that Ferrin was sincere. “You’re not from here. Why are you willing to help me?”

“If we were ready to move on, we would have already gone,” Ferrin said. “Could be we’re bored. Could be we’re curious. Could be we have fond memories of those kids from Earth. Could be Harvan amuses us. Could be we can relate to the need to overthrow evil. Could be we really could use a few more good deeds to take with us wherever we go next.”

“Once you come down with heroism, it can be a tricky illness to kick,” Drake said.

Harvan returned to the room, smiling and spreading out his arms. “Cole, what do you say?”

“I think you found good guys,” Cole said.

“We’re lucky to have them,” Harvan agreed. “So many people at the Hall of Glory just want to rest. They’re letting go of heartache and horrors and getting ready to move on. Not us. We’re just getting started. Trust me. These two are seasoned, and they’re willing to help. We’ll need strong wills on this mission. I can hear it in their music.”

“Will we need weapons?” Drake asked.

“They’re difficult to obtain here,” Harvan said. “Swords and spears probably won’t decide this.”

“Is there any point to my sword?” Cole asked.

“Just one,” Ferrin replied. “At the tip.”

“Beat me to it,” Harvan said, snapping his fingers in disappointment. “Cole, carrying a weapon in the echolands can be useful for intimidation. And you could physically destroy an echo with a sword—just not as easily as a mortal body.”

“The battles here aren’t won by physical combat?” Drake asked.

“They can be,” Harvan said. “But often stealth can be more useful. Or cunning. Or strength of will. There are dark forces in the echolands that can ensnare you. Treacherous echoes will try to trick you into a bargain. They also might try to bind you with their wills.”

“I think that happened to me,” Cole said.

“Couldn’t move?” Harvan asked.



“Once at Gamat Rue,” Cole said. “They froze my actual body there. Not just my echo. I couldn’t even wiggle a finger. I was frozen another time here in the echolands. I couldn’t move at first but broke free.”

“Good illustrations,” Harvan said. “There are different types of bindings. If a weaver is helping your enemies from the other side, or if you’ve made a bargain with them, or if you’re at a location controlled by their music, their power to bind you increases. If they just try to bind you out in the open, it’s basically their will against yours. Refuse to submit and you’ll break free. With a little practice, a strong will can shake off bindings quickly. The more abruptly you do it, the more you’ll stun the binder.”

“There was one other time I got frozen in the echolands,” Cole said. “A group bound me.”

“If they attack in large numbers, it can be your will against many,” Harvan said. “Having five of us together will help offset that risk. Also, enemies could try to physically restrain us and throw us into a slipstream or a holding pit.”

“Is it bad that I want somebody to try to control me?” Ferrin asked.

Harvan shook his head. “Confidence will go a long way against bindings and anything else they throw at us. Just don’t go looking for trouble.”

“Fair enough,” Ferrin said.

“Cole, fill these guys in on where we’re going,” Harvan said.

“They know about the princesses?” Cole asked.

“The basics,” Drake said. “We’re looking for Destiny?”

“Last we heard, she was heading for a place called Deepwell,” Cole said. “It’s where they were trying to control her shaping power. Which could mean there is some sort of monster there. The shapecrafters do bad things with these powers.”

“So off to Deepwell,” Harvan said.

Cole picked up the message from the table. “The prelate of the Temple of the Robust Sky asked me to deliver this to the Sweet Channel Charnel House. But the echo who figured out who I was got curious about me because the message was masking me.”

“The message works great,” Harvan said. “Elana Parson knows her craft. I take it the echo who found you out was up close?”

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“From a distance the message will mask you just fine,” Harvan said. “It’s good work. Winston will be masking himself, me, and you as well. We don’t need to hide

Drake or Ferrin. They have no history here. Their presence will make us look like a random group of echoes to all but the most-skilled observers.”

“Won’t the skilled ones be the most dangerous?” Ferrin asked.

“True, but also the least frequent to encounter,” Harvan said. “We’ll avoid populated areas. Cole, should we deliver the message? The Sweet Channel Charnel House isn’t far from our destination, and right on the way.”

“The prelate wrote a real message,” Cole said. “She told me her friend Lottie Natt would help me and can give me a better disguise.”

“Then we have a destination,” Harvan said. “The temple prelates are among the best weavers in Necronum. I don’t know Elana Parson personally, but we don’t want to overlook her advice.”

“What exactly is a charnel house?” Cole asked.

“In the echolands, it’s a place to bring dead echoes,” Harvan said. “They dump them into a channel. The house is typically insulated against the call of the Other.”

“Dead echoes can still walk and talk,” Cole said.

“To different degrees,” Harvan said. “For example, if you return to life, your echo will linger and remain as lively as a dead echo can be. It won’t learn, but it won’t get any more susceptible to the homesong than you were when you departed. If at all possible, your echo will await the return of your lifespark. Once your lifeforce moves on to the Other, if the dead echo is not washed away in a slipstream, it will linger and gradually darken. Some become catatonic. Some grow violent.”

“Do echoes ever die outside of the channels?” Cole asked.

“Some people hear the call of the Other so strongly they simply leave their echo behind,” Harvan said. “No slipstream, no wandering off into the fringe—the lifeforce just goes. It seems to happen more frequently to those who cross over at a very old age. Sometimes a powerful weaver or echomancer can cause your lifespark to leave your echo, but usually only if you allow them power over you. And if an echo takes enough physical damage, it can die, freeing the lifeforce.”

“If we get imprisoned, can we let our lifeforce go?” Ferrin asked.

“I was once bound for many years,” Harvan said. “I wanted to move on. It would have been a welcome release at the time. But I couldn’t. If we get captured in certain haunting grounds or by a skilled echomancer, they can block the effects of the homesong. If that happens, you can end up trapped for ages.”

“The worst thing would be getting caught by Nazeem,” Cole said.

“True,” Harvan agreed. “He remains somewhat in the shadows, but what I know of his abilities exceeds much of what I believed possible. We’re talking about the

inventor of shapecraft. Yet falling under his power is the reality our princesses are facing.”

“We have to save them,” Cole said.

“We’ll do it,” Ferrin said.

Drake confirmed with a nod.

## CHAPTER

# 20

## CHARNEL HOUSE

Walking away from the Hall of Glory, Cole felt much better than he had so far in the echolands. He wasn't alone! Four seasoned adventurers strode at his side, ready to guide and protect him. Sure, they were ghosts, but so was he for now, so why complain?

Cole was the shortest of the group by a good margin, followed in height by Winston, Ferrin, Drake, and finally Harvan. Nobody else had a sword, but Cole suspected Harvan had thumped people with his heavy walking stick before, and it was a comfort knowing Winston could weave.

The exciting music of the Hall of Glory trumpeted loud and clear, causing Cole to pause and gaze back at the sprawling building. They were leaving behind the safest refuge in the echolands. He could picture the lavish rooms and courtyards full of relaxed heroes. Harvan came up beside him.

"Feel the pull?" Harvan asked.

Cole especially noticed the draw now that Harvan had put a name to it. The farther they had walked from the comfortable oasis, the more reluctant Cole had felt about departing. Even though he knew they needed to find Destiny, it seemed like they were missing something big. The music beckoned brashly. Couldn't they go back and rest a bit longer? What was the rush? Would a few hours make much difference?

"Yes," Cole said.

"Feels like something is about to start," Ferrin said. "Some rousing event that we never experienced during our long stay. Seems like if we hurry, we might get there just in time."

"Then you arrive, and it's the same people lounging around the same rooms," Harvan said. "I've come and gone a lot."

"Even knowing why we must go, the music is beguiling," Drake said. "Emotion can be stronger than reason."

“The summons is strong,” Harvan agreed. “It helps lure people from various worlds to the echolands. I have seen many attempt to depart the hall only to return minutes later.”

Ferrin detached one arm just above the elbow and held it out toward the Hall of Glory. “Maybe I can leave a little piece of myself.”

Cole couldn’t help laughing. Ferrin grinned as he reattached his limb.

“Come on,” Harvan said, walking again. “The pull will fade after we get far enough away.”

“Who comes to the echolands?” Cole asked. “Everybody in the Outskirts? Everyone on Earth? How many other worlds?”

“Far as I can tell, just about everybody from the Outskirts makes a stop here,” Harvan said. “The echolands only get a sampling of people from other worlds, often drawn by a big landmark like the Hall of Glory or the Catacombs of Regret.”

“Those catacombs sound like loads of fun,” Ferrin said sarcastically.

“I’ve visited,” Harvan said. “The Hall of Glory is more pleasant, but the catacombs serve a purpose as well. The echolands are a way station—a pause on the journey to higher planes. The interruption can be helpful for some. I am benefitting from my time here. Yet, I assume many from different worlds move on to the Other without this interlude.”

They climbed out of the valley that contained the Hall of Glory. A panorama of lush hills, thriving forests, emerald lawns, and blooming fields spread out before them.

“It’s beautiful,” Drake said reverently.

“We didn’t get much of a view on the way in,” Ferrin explained, looking around. “We entered these lands right by the Hall of Glory, and its presence controlled our attention. Look at the colors! Are you guys sure this isn’t heaven?”

“Much of it can be a paradise of sorts,” Harvan said. “But trust me, I’ve encountered plenty of places and people here that nobody would confuse with heaven.”

“I had no idea this splendor awaited,” Drake said. “I would have left the hall long ago.”

“Outdoorsman?” Winston asked.

“Some of my favorite years were spent alone in the wilderness,” Drake said. “But even after wandering far and wide in Lyrian, nothing could have prepared me for this. The sounds alone!”

“The music is incredible,” Ferrin said. “Just as Harvan promised.”

“What is that most lovely, longing melody in the distance?” Drake asked, his eyes losing focus.

“That would be the call of the Other,” Harvan said.

Drake shook his head briskly and blinked. “I see now why people go willingly,” he said.

“I don’t hear it,” Ferrin said. “There’s a lot of nice music, but only the hall back there is calling me.”

“I don’t hear it either,” Cole said.

“Don’t be in a hurry to discern it,” Harvan said. “At least not until you want to move on. Try not to dwell on the call, Drake. Let it exist in the background, a far-off promise to be fulfilled one day.”

Drake smiled. “I know how to be patient.”

“Patience has never been my best virtue,” Harvan admitted. “Any objection to running? It takes a little more concentration and energy, but you won’t grow tired. We have some distance to cover. It can save loads of time.”

“Lead on,” Ferrin said.

They sped up to a quick jog. After a few minutes Cole wondered why he hadn’t done this before he was chased. He could have covered much more ground. Thinking back, he supposed the echolands had all been so new, and he had worried about getting lost. Walking had just felt appropriate.

Cole wondered where Dalton and Hunter could be right now. Had they found his body at the Temple of the Robust Sky? Were they on their way to Jenna? Had they already found her? What would they think of the echolands, with the vivid colors and music everywhere?

He thought about Jace, Mira, and Joe as well. Could they hear any nice music where they were being held? Could they see any beautiful gardens? The imagined deprivations made Cole better appreciate the sights and sounds before him.

From time to time Harvan mentioned that he heard dead echoes, or a village, and would swerve off in one direction or another. The first time they reached a channel, they arrived directly at a bridge. And again at the second channel. And the third. Cole realized that Harvan could hear the bridges long before they came into view.

After some time Cole found himself running beside Winston. Not having spoken in hours, he decided to strike up a conversation.

“How’d you meet Harvan?” Cole asked. “Did you know him when you were alive?” He found it wasn’t difficult to talk and run. He wasn’t out of breath at all.

“I was born after he died,” Winston said. “But I knew his stories. We met in the

Hall of Glory. He needed a weaver, and I thought it would be fun to explore the afterlife with a legend.”

“Has it been fun?”

“Sometimes. And scary. But worth it.”

They mostly ran without conversation. Occasionally, Harvan explained a shift in direction. They traversed a region with many large hills, and then a flatter expanse, with sparse trees. They crossed several channels, some wide, others narrow. A few of the channels seemed to flow uphill. Apparently, streaming away from the Source toward the Other trumped pesky laws like gravity.

They saw no lakes or deserts or true mountains or deep canyons. A few areas had some boulders, and towns were sometimes glimpsed in the distance, but for the most part they were exploring enormous, verdant parkland.

“Out here you notice the single day more,” Ferrin commented. “I keep waiting for the light to fail.”

“The endless sunrise,” Harvan said. “You never get fully used to it. You think your shoes will wear out, but they don’t. Your clothes never get smelly. You can eat or not, but you never have to use a bathroom. Everything has a different rhythm here.”

“I tried eating once,” Cole said. “It was good.”

“I avoid it when I can,” Harvan said. “I think eating the food gives the echolands a stronger hold on you. That can be good if you want to apprehend the music with greater sensitivity but bad if you don’t want to heed the call of the Other.”

“If your focus falters, you should eat,” Winston said. “I think Harvan fasts too much.”

“When in doubt, starve,” Harvan said.

“Doesn’t the food help keep trances away?” Cole asked.

“It can,” Harvan said. “But trances can have benefits, as long as they don’t lead you into danger. You’ve probably experienced light trances as we’ve been running. Trances can rest the mind kind of like sleep, and they keep boredom away.”

“We wouldn’t want to get bored,” Winston said.

“Tedium gnaws at some of us more than others,” Harvan replied. “Anyhow, it’s true that if your concentration gets muddied, food can help, effectively substituting for healthy trances.”

“How can you tell a good trance from a bad one?” Cole asked.

“You retain your awareness in the good ones,” Harvan said. “You can snap out of them at will. If you start experiencing blackouts, you’re in danger.”

“You just might wake up falling into a channel,” Winston said.

“Or getting captured,” Harvan added.

“My people don’t sleep, even in mortality,” Drake said. “This concept of using trances to rest and revive the mind seems perfectly natural.”

“I like running without tiring,” Ferrin said. “Though horses would be nice.”

As Cole continued to run with the others, he lost track of time. He would see hills ahead in the distance, shaggy with trees, and eventually, they would be in the distance behind him. As he enjoyed the steady exertion of running, and the soothing music around him, Cole supposed he might be slipping into trances, but he never lost his awareness.

And then Harvan called a halt at an overlook. “That, my friends, is the Sweet Channel.”

The fairly narrow channel ran in nearly a straight line. A stone building spanned the slipstream.

“Is that the charnel house?” Cole asked.

“Unless my ears are deceived,” Harvan said. “And they aren’t.”

“Does this mean we’re near Deepwell?” Cole asked.

“Not too far,” Harvan said. “We can probably learn more from your contact.”

They jogged to the stone house and knocked on the door. A beefy man answered, not fully opening the door. He eyed the group.

“I see no dead echoes,” the man said. “How can I help you?”

“I have a message for Lottie Natt,” Cole said.

The man looked at him suspiciously, glanced at the Jumping Sword, then held out a hand. “I can see she gets it.”

“I’m supposed to deliver it personally,” Cole said. “It comes from the Temple of the Robust Sky.”

The man gave a soft grunt. “How about this? Each of you tell me whether you sympathize with Nazeem. Go.”

“No,” Cole said.

One at a time the others also gave negative answers.

“Do you mean any harm to any who dwell here?” the man followed up.

Again they all answered in the negative.

The man gave a nod and pulled the door wider. “Come inside.”

The ground floor of the building was a single long room. Another door awaited on the far side, presumably offering access to the other shore of the channel. Doors on the other walls led to walkways overlooking the slipstream. Stacked barrels and crates



filled in the spaces between the doors. Winches stood beside a pair of large trapdoors in the floor. In one corner a flight of stairs granted access to a second story.

A woman bustled toward them, short and pudgy with her cinnamon-and-sugar hair wound into an enormous bun. She wore a brown dress and a big white apron. “Ernie, are you admitting strangers without dead echoes? Did we not have this conversation?”

“They have a message for you,” Ernie said. “They passed the questions.”

The woman stood before them, hands on her hips. “The young one is bright. The rest look like hooligans.”

“You have a sharp eye,” Harvan said smoothly.

“Don’t sass me or I’ll drop you through an etherhatch,” she snapped. “Who is the message from?”

Cole took it out. “Are you Lottie Natt?”

“I better be or I’m in the wrong house,” Lottie replied.

“It’s from Elana Parson,” Cole said, handing it over.

“Elana? Really?” Lottie said, inspecting the seal. “So it would seem, and so the weaving suggests. My word, your power is damaged. You’re sure you don’t serve Nazeem?”

“Positive,” Cole said. “Bad things sometimes happen to those who fight him.”

Lottie clucked her tongue. “Join him and your power gets maimed. Resist him and you can expect the same. How do we win? Ride the slipstream?” She opened the message and scanned the words.

“You drop bodies into the channel through the hatches?” Cole asked, unable to resist his curiosity.

“Dead echoes, yes,” Lottie said, still reading. Her eyes rose to reconsider her visitors. “Do you realize half the inhabitants of the echolands are looking for either this boy or his quarry?”

“We intend to protect him and find Destiny,” Harvan said with a slight bow.

“And who might you be?” Lottie asked.

“Harvan Kane,” he replied. “Perhaps you’ve heard of me?”

“Catchy name,” Lottie said, rolling her eyes. “And these gents are your muscle? A weaver and two Outsiders.”

“The weaver will help us hide,” Harvan said. “And the Outsiders can’t have been corrupted.”

“Careful with your assumptions,” Lottie said. “Nazeem is infecting the echolands faster than the common cold. But you seem to be right. I don’t sense his influence in them.”

“Neither do I,” Ferrin said.

“Are you all cheeky?” Lottie complained.

“It’s a good sign,” Ferrin said. “Our spirits are high despite plenty of danger and a long run.”

“Straight from the Hall of Glory,” Lottie said. “You still have traces of it. Coming out of retirement? That’s the safest haven we’ve got around here. You can’t earn a better one.”

“We’re trying to reach Deepwell,” Harvan said.

“That will be markedly worse,” Lottie assured him. “You’re good at reading music or you wouldn’t have made it here. Nazeem has a host of agents looking for that boy. I’ve never seen anything like it. Three separate search parties have dropped in on me during the past week.”

“It’s one big day,” Ferrin pointed out.

“Some of the more civilized among us keep time as reckoned in Necronum,” Lottie whispered, as if sharing a secret.

“So many?” Harvan asked. “All looking for the boy?”

“And the girl,” Lottie said. “Destiny. It’s ludicrous. A month ago nobody had heard of Nazeem. Now half the echoes you meet are working for him. That sort of following develops over time. Never has it been accomplished so quietly.”

“He’s based out of the Fallen Temple,” Harvan said.

Lottie paled. “That explains some of it.” She confronted Cole. “Boy, you’re bright. That much is plain. But you’re not smart. What smart person would be in your position? Your mortal life hasn’t ended. Shouldn’t you return to your body and get as far from Necronum as possible?”

“Not without Destiny,” Cole said. “I have duties.”

Lottie looked unconvinced. “It’s hard to be the rescuer and the quarry. If this Nazeem gets hold of you, I expect you’ll rather you had dropped through my etherhatch and sped off to the Other.”

“We’ll have to avoid getting caught,” Cole said.

“Isn’t he great?” Harvan said with a smile.

“The perfect target for an opportunist,” Lottie said. “A willing victim.”

“We’re not using him,” Harvan said, sounding offended.

“He’s a kid,” Lottie said. “He has no business playing hero in the afterlife. Certainly not with Nazeem hunting him.”

“I came to them,” Cole said. “Without Harvan I’d be doing this on my own. I can’t run from Nazeem. It doesn’t matter where I go. He has people everywhere. And I’m

not abandoning my friends. The only way I win is if Nazeem loses.”

Folding her arms, Lottie shook her head and clucked her tongue. “I’ll work up something to mask your identity. Then you had best be on your way.”

“Thanks for the hospitality,” Harvan said lightly.

“Mind your manners,” Lottie said, pointing at him. “You shouldn’t stay anywhere for long, no matter how you’re disguising yourselves. We haven’t seen anything like Nazeem before. Your best bet is to keep moving. A sprint is the right pace.”

“Thank you,” Cole said.

“Any word of activity near Deepwell?” Harvan asked.

“Plenty until recently,” Lottie said, going to a table and snipping a piece of yarn. “A strange lot was taking up space there—bright echoes, weavers, and shapecrafters. Plenty of activity on both sides. The commotion has quieted over the past couple of weeks.”

“Does that mean the trail will be cold?” Drake asked.

“Could be,” Harvan said. “We’ll know soon.”

“Let me concentrate for a moment,” Lottie said, closing her eyes and rolling the yarn between her thumbs and fingers.

“Weaving with yarn,” Winston said. “I like it.”

Lottie opened one eye. “Hush. But thank you.” She closed her eye again.

They waited and watched. Cole didn’t think it looked like much was happening.

Lottie opened her eyes. “Keep this in your pocket. It’ll help shield you from scrutiny.”

Cole accepted the orange strand.

“That’s good work,” Winston said.

“It really is,” Harvan agreed.

“What?” Lottie asked. “You didn’t expect to find a skilled weaver in a charnel house? We all have different callings. I like helping dead echoes move on.”

“Have you been here long?” Harvan asked, real curiosity in his tone.

“Longer than any of you,” Lottie said. Then she shrugged. “Of course, it’s all just one big moment, so who am I to brag? Ironic when you ponder it. I send thousands of dead echoes off toward the Other, but hesitate to pass that way myself.”

“It’s very quiet in here,” Winston said. “I can’t hear the Other, or the slipstream, or any music besides our own.”

Lottie winked. “Might be part of the reason I’ve hung on so long. You should go.”

“Any tips on how best to approach Deepwell?” Harvan asked.

“Don’t follow the channel,” Lottie said. “You’ll hit a town. Not a very friendly

one. Go out the opposite door from where you entered. Loop around. Keep to the trees. The Hundred Forests has plenty. Stay away from everyone. But you know that.”

“What else do you know about Deepwell?” Harvan pressed.

“It has still water,” Lottie answered.

“That’s the one thing I knew,” Harvan said.

“It was once a little village, but now it’s more of a compound,” Lottie said. “It’s heavily shielded against using weaving or songreading to spy.”

Harvan fingered his beard. “We have to get inside. You’re a very talented weaver. Could you disguise our music to match shapecrafters?”

“You’re taking the boy Nazeem wants to find *into* Deepwell?” Lottie asked.

“It’s our best chance of finding Destiny,” Cole said.

Lottie tossed up her hands in surrender. “I suppose you’ll have a better chance of survival with decent disguises. Very well. I’ve recently had some shapecrafters come knocking. Their music is fresh in my memory.”

“You’re no echo,” Harvan said. “You’re an angel.”

“How often do you use that line?” Lottie asked.

“Only on extraordinary occasions,” Harvan said. “About those disguises . . . my face is fairly recognizable. This would work best if we had something to *shroud* our appearances. New clothes are so hard to come by in the echolands. . . .”

“Are you fishing for burial shrouds?” Lottie asked.

Harvan looked surprised, but Cole thought it came across a bit forced. “Do you have some to spare? Are they hooded?”

“I can spare some,” Lottie said. “I have a reliable supplier. I’ll weave the music directly into the material. They’ll only disguise you if you’re wearing them.”

“That would be outstanding,” Harvan gushed. “Can you do one extra? In case we find somebody? And make the smallest a bright shapercrafter to better match the boy?”

“Shall I bake you a cake as well?” Lottie asked. “Any favorite toppings?”

“We so appreciate your aid,” Harvan said, striding over to Cole and putting an arm around him. “This little fella may owe his survival to you.”

“Ernie,” Lottie said flatly. “Help me retrieve some shrouds.”

He lugged a few bulging sacks to her and started opening them.

“These will do well,” Lottie said, holding up a cowled robe.

“Perfect,” Harvan agreed. “Nazeem tends to segregate his people. Most are strangers to one another. With our music disguised and the right story, we may be able to walk right into Deepwell.”

“Sounds ideal,” Ferrin said. “Especially if they also let us walk right out.”

They waited as Lottie worked her weavings on the shrouds. Eventually, she folded them and stuffed them into a coarse sack. Ernie delivered it to Harvan, who nodded at Winston. The shorter man stepped forward and accepted the gift.

“You just saved our lives,” Harvan said graciously.

“Glad to be of service,” Lottie said. “Any friend of Elana Parson deserves a good turn.”

“A thousand thanks for your aid,” Harvan said with a bow.

“Off with you, Mr. Slick Beard,” Lottie said. “You look out for this boy.”

“We will,” Ferrin assured her.

“Thanks,” Cole said.

Lottie laid a hand on his arm. “Don’t stay in the echolands a minute longer than necessary. Find that girl and get out.”

“I’ll do my best,” Cole said.

“And don’t lose that yarn,” Lottie said. “Your true music will be naked without it.”

Cole patted his pocket. “Got it.”

“But leave the yarn behind if you use a shroud,” Lottie clarified.

“Will do,” Cole said.

Ernie opened the far door, and music flooded into the room, allowing Cole to better appreciate how quiet it had been. They gathered near the doorway.

“Are we running?” Ferrin asked.

“You had better,” Lottie said.

“You heard the lady,” Harvan said, breaking into a sprint.

Cole chased them out the door.

CHAPTER  
— 21 —

**DEEPWELL**

**R**unning among the trees was a different experience from running over the grass. The forests had their own music, more stately and enduring than some of the other themes. Amid the trunks, under canopies of leaves and needles, the songs of the fields and sky became muted. Without much underbrush, and with no dead leaves, branches, or trees crowding the forest floor, their way was hardly more obstructed than on the lawns. Instead of a natural forest, they might have been dashing through a many-pillared woodland temple.

For the first while after leaving the charnel house behind, Cole felt an added weight of worry. Lottie had confirmed suspicions that Nazeem had many echoes looking for him. No matter Harvan's skill, how much longer could they expect to elude pursuit? And once they were found, how much better would five be than one against the combined forces of the shapecrafters?

But hours under the trees helped allay his fears. Harvan continued to veer in different directions as he sensed the music of other echoes or settlements. Cole took hope that they wouldn't need to outrun the servants of Nazeem forever—just long enough to accomplish their mission.

If Destiny was at Deepwell, part of his mission could be over shortly. Then he would just need to find Honor and Mira. And Jace and Joe. Hopefully, some of them had already found one another or were being held together.

From up ahead unsettling music began to interrupt the song of the trees. Cole instinctively wanted to steer away from that direction, but they weren't turning. "Is that Deepwell?" Cole asked.

"Not friendly music," Harvan said. "But it happens to be our destination."

"Should we put on our shrouds yet?" Winston asked.

"You're just tired of carrying the bag," Harvan said.

Winston shifted the sack to his other shoulder. "And I'm wondering if a group of shapecrafters approaching Deepwell might attract less attention than five anonymous echoes."

Harvan slowed to a walk, then stopped, hands on his hips. "I see the sense in that."

Winston opened the sack and began dispensing the shrouds, giving the smallest to Cole. "We have one extra," Winston announced. "I'll bring it."

"I'm no expert, but the music seems conspicuously dark," Ferrin said. "Why don't they mask it like we're doing?"

"Disguising music is tricky," Harvan said. "Something small like a person is easier than something large. Also, the music of a place is the result of the fundamental nature of the place. If they masked the song too well, the place would no longer be suited to their purposes. Believe it or not, some people find this music inviting."

"You think they'll just let us in?" Drake asked.

"It'll take some persuading," Harvan said. "It helps that the shapecrafters haven't been organized as a group for long. Most have been operating solo. Nazeem kept his people separated. Military procedures are new to them. I've been doing this for some time, so I know some of their protocols and passwords. I'm also pretty good at stretching the truth."

"Truer words were never spoken," Winston muttered.

"It's difficult to lie in the echolands," Harvan said. "That reality can leave guards with a false sense of security after a few simple questions, if you manipulate the details correctly. The music of our shrouds should help, since they will partly conceal any falsehoods. Very few echoes have the talent to weave such effective disguises. But be ready for us to fail. We may have to fight our way out."

The robe was a little long on Cole, the hem dragging, the sleeves covering his hands. "What should I do with my yarn?" Cole asked. "Lottie said not to bring it once I put on the shroud."

Harvan held out a hand. "It will interfere with the music of the shroud. Let's leave it here." He placed it at the base of a tree. "We'll return to this spot and retrieve it."

"Will you be able to find it?" Ferrin asked, scanning the area.

"It has a certain music all its own," Harvan said. "Knowing what to listen for, I can get us back here. On we go."

Before too long they reached a break in the trees and had their first view of Deepwell. The village of squat stone buildings had a stone wall around it. Unlike several towns Cole had seen in the echolands, no vegetation grew on the walls or

rooftops. A narrow channel ran along the far side of the town, its whistling music mostly eclipsed by the sinister song of Deepwell.

“There really is a well of still water here,” Harvan said. “Calm water is a rarity in the echolands.”

“Does it carry benefits?” Drake asked.

“Nothing so grand as the scarcity suggests,” Harvan said. “Like the fruit, it replenishes energy. And it’s nostalgic.”

“Have you considered leaving Cole outside of the town with a guard or two?” Ferrin asked.

Harvan turned to Cole. “What do you think?”

“I’d rather help find Destiny,” he said without hesitation.

“It’s probably the right move,” Harvan said. “These surroundings have to be heavily monitored. No matter how your music is concealed, if you wait here for long, you’ll arouse suspicion. Plus, when we leave, it might be in a hurry. I think we should stick together and remember that protecting Cole is our top priority.”

“Might be hard to protect him if they capture us,” Drake said.

Harvan raised an eyebrow. “Simple. We don’t let them take us. Remember, strong wills. Don’t let them push us around. Follow my lead.” He flipped up his hood. The others did likewise.

Harvan marched away from the cover of the trees, advancing like he owned Deepwell and wanted to make sure there had been no nonsense in his absence. The others hustled to catch up.

Cole felt tense inside. Harvan seemed overconfident. Maybe that was part of the ruse? Acting certain so the guards would accept him? Cole hoped he knew what he was doing.

If they were captured here, Cole might never see Dalton or Hunter again. Was he crazy to believe they still might make it home? He was currently in the afterlife of another world. Home felt a billion miles away. And it might actually be farther than that.

Hopefully, Dalton and Hunter were having better luck than him. Hopefully, they were eluding pursuit and finding Jenna. It helped to picture somebody happy. He tried not to dwell on Mira, Jace, and Joe, trapped somewhere in the echolands.

The only gates in the wall were closed. As they approached, Harvan raised his voice. “Open up—we’ve had a long journey.”

“Who goes there?” called a guard, just his head appearing over the top of the wall.

“Who do you think? Five who know the source of unmentionable power.”



“That’s well and good,” the guard responded. “But how about names or passwords?”

“We have Drake with us, and Ferrin. The other names are our own. As for passwords, we’ve been on assignment. How about ‘slumber long no more’? Or the one about skies and hills.”

“Over sky and under hill,” the guard supplied. “Both of those are old.”

“Unlike cozy guardsmen, we’ve been out chasing leads,” Harvan said impatiently.

“Who is your master?” the guard asked.

“Nazeem directly controls our fate,” Harvan answered swiftly. “Right now, you’re our master until that gate opens.”

“I’m not trying to be difficult,” the guard replied. “You know the routine.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re very dutiful,” Harvan said.

“I don’t suppose you want to show your face?” the guard asked.

“You have your rules—we have ours,” Harvan said. “Our identities are to remain guarded. You know how Nazeem can be. We need to interview your prisoners and hurry onward.”

“Won’t take long,” the guard said. “We only have the one. You’ll have to talk to Ryger to get access.”

“Can somebody show us the way?” Harvan asked.

The gates opened. “Katka will guide you,” the guard called down.

A woman approached, tall with narrow features. The sides of her head were shaved, the hair on top black and combed sideways. Her skin had the unmistakable glow of a bright echo.

“You look shiny,” Harvan said. “Let me guess. You’re the mediator meant to verify our true identities?”

Katka held out a hand, and he shook it. “I don’t have to guess to know your robe is a disguise.”

“I’m not supposed to reveal my true identity,” Harvan said. “Orders from the top.”

“Like all primary mediators at secure locations, I represent Nazeem,” Katka said. “You will all reveal your identities to me.”

“Naturally,” Harvan said. “But not here. Far too many eyes and ears. Perhaps we can visit Ryger? He’ll want our identities confirmed as well.”

“Very well,” she said. “Follow me.”

She led them down a cobblestone street away from the wall. Cole tried to keep his face as deep in the hood of his robe as possible. Unlike at the Hall of Glory, entering

Deepwell didn't quiet the music. If anything, the disturbing cacophony had become even more invasive.

Cole didn't like how many echoes he saw roaming the village. At least twenty men and women. There had to be more inside the buildings. Every step away from the gate was a step they might be losing for a retreat. How would they fight their way past so many enemies? The bluffing had to hold.

Harvan fell into step beside Katka. "You won't share our identities with anyone besides Ryger," he said.

"Only if they have premiere clearance," Katka assured. "Your identity could not be safer than in my care."

"I love the hair, by the way," Harvan said.

She ran a hand across the short bristles. "You talk a lot for somebody trying to go unnoticed."

"I love being noticed," Harvan said warmly. "I just prefer to remain unknown."

"Your friends don't talk much," Katka said.

"Our spokesman does plenty of talking for twice our number," Ferrin said.

"That I believe," Katka said. "What's with the little one?"

Cole didn't like her attention swinging his way. He already felt out of place because of his stature. There were no kids in view. He kept his eyes off Katka's face and did his best to stand up straight.

"He's actually a giant," Harvan said. "Best disguise in the group."

Katka laughed a little.

"Are you on this side often?" Harvan asked.

"Lately, as we head into the final phases," she replied. "I heard you back at the gate. Are you having any luck with the hunt?"

"So many leads," Harvan said. "Too many, sometimes. False trails. We still haven't puzzled everything together. We're hoping your prisoner might help us explore some theories."

"Not willingly," Katka said. "You'll have to be in top form. I can tell you're good with people."

"That's quite a compliment, considering your area of expertise," Harvan said.

"Sure, I read people," Katka replied. "They can't hide from me, especially here. But you're a charmer."

"Who is the prisoner?" Harvan asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

"You're not that good," Katka said. "We need permission from Ryger before we delve into details. And before that happens, I need a look under your hoods."

A guard at a door stepped aside, and they entered one of the larger buildings in the village. It looked to have once been an inn. The tables and chairs were all cleared off to one side. A man at a desk blocked the way to the kitchen, and another obstructed the hall that led to the rooms.

Katka led them to the man blocking the kitchen.

“You have quite an entourage today, Katka,” the man said.

“We need to see Ryger,” she replied.

“And if he’s busy?” the man asked.

“We’ll wait,” she said.

The man stood up and stepped aside. “He’s available. You know the way.”

As Cole walked past the man into the kitchen, he pictured fighting his way out. The chances of escaping if somebody raised an alarm were feeling slim. He tried to thrust away his fearful thoughts. They were here. The task at hand was convincing Katka they belonged. He had to act natural. Once again he hoped Harvan knew what he was doing.

They descended a flight of stairs from the kitchen down to a stone-lined storeroom. Katka approached a door and knocked.

“Enter,” came a surly voice from inside.

Katka opened the door and admitted them to a spacious room where a heavysset man with a dark unibrow reclined on a bed, fingers laced behind his head, potbelly projecting upward. There was no other furniture in the room.

“Hello, Ryger,” Katka said.

He moved his eyes to regard them without shifting his head. “So many visitors? And so mysterious with the hoods?”

“They’re under orders to remain anonymous,” Katka said. “We’re about to find out who they are.”

“Have you figured out how to sleep?” Harvan asked.

“I find a bed more comfortable,” Ryger said.

“We need to talk to your prisoner,” Harvan said.

“That would explain your presence in the dungeon,” Ryger said. “Are you stalling?”

Katka approached Harvan. “Lose the robe, mystery man.”

“Okay,” Harvan said with a nod. Pushing off against Katka, he sprung to the bed and cracked Ryger over the head with a sudden and vicious blow from his walking stick.

Winston extended his hands toward Katka. “Hold her,” Harvan said. “Don’t hurt her.”

Drake and Ferrin raced forward, taking Katka by each arm as Winston chanted and gestured.

As Ryger tried to roll off the bed, Harvan smashed him on the head again. And again. He kept trying to rise. After the third blow, Ryger stayed down.

“I’ve got her,” Winston said.

“Hurry,” Harvan ordered, still wailing on Ryger. “You saw the keys?”

“Yes,” Ferrin said, leaving Katka to lift the large key ring off the knob at the head of the bed.

“Fetch the prisoner,” Winston said, his voice a little strained. “I have her.”

As Cole rushed to the door with Drake and Ferrin, he glanced back to see Katka standing as still as a statue. Setting his walking stick aside, Harvan had crouched down and put Ryger in a headlock.

Back in the room that led up to the kitchen, there were two other doors. One was ajar. Ferrin raced to the other, found it locked, but chose the right key on the third try, revealing a hallway beyond. And a guard with a mustache.

“Who are you?” the guard asked.

Ferrin flipped back his hood. “Ryger sent us to interview the prisoner,” he said casually.

Considering the clawing panic he felt inside, Cole could hardly believe how calm the displacer sounded.

The guard scowled. “He would have joined you or sent another guard.”

“Those rules don’t apply in a nightmare,” Ferrin said, removing his hood.

The astonished guard never saw Drake coming. The seedman hit him low and hard, tackling him to the floor, then straddling him and pummeling him.

“Come on,” Ferrin said, head back in place. There were several doors on either side of the hall beyond the guard. Ferrin raised his voice. “We’re here to rescue you! Where are you?”

A muffled thumping commenced a few doors down on the right, along with stifled cries of “Here! Here!”

Ferrin started testing keys. There were twelve on the ring. It took five attempts.

The door swung open to reveal Desmond, dressed just how Cole had seen him on a cot beside Honor and Destiny back at the Temple of the Robust Sky. The knight withdrew a couple of paces from the doorway. “Who are you?” he asked warily.

Cole realized his hood was hiding his face. He flipped it back. “We’re here to get you out,” he said.

Desmond looked like he was trying to say something.

“Yes?” Cole asked.

Desmond shook his head. “Later. Good to see you, Cole. Your escort is on our side?” He jerked a thumb at Ferrin.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER  
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## PRISONER

**G**ood to meet you,” Ferrin said with a nod. “We should run.”

“Yes,” Desmond agreed.

“Leave the door open!” Harvan called.

Cole turned to see Harvan entering the hall of cells, dragging Ryger, the thickset man still in a headlock. Drake had his guard pinned to the floor.

“We’ll lock them in here,” Harvan said. “The prison doesn’t allow for external spying or mental communication. Let’s use the weaving that protects this place to our advantage.”

“What about Winston?” Ferrin asked.

“Could you go lend him a hand with Katka?” Harvan suggested. “Is this the prisoner? No princesses?”

“Sorry,” Desmond said.

“He’s Desmond,” Cole said. “He was with Honor. He used to serve under the Dreadknight at Blackmont Castle.”

“Desmond, help Drake drag his man to the cell,” Harvan said.

Cole held the cell door open while Harvan manhandled Ryger into the small room. Drake and Desmond came next with their guard. Then Ferrin returned to the hall, carrying Katka, who remained rigid. Winston followed, still muttering and gesturing.

“Katka isn’t close enough to her physical body to return to the other side,” Harvan said. “It came through in her music. Once I heard that, I knew we had a chance.”

After Ferrin set Katka in the cell, Harvan flung Ryger to the floor, and Drake abandoned the other guard. Desmond, Ferrin, Drake, and Harvan raced out of the cell, and Winston quit chanting to help Cole slam the door, then made sure it was locked.

“That should hold them for now,” Harvan said. “Come on.”

They ran out of the hall and closed the door. Harvan dashed to the room where they met Ryger, retrieved his walking stick, and grabbed a sack, which he tossed to Winston.

“We entered as five,” Harvan said. “They’ll notice us leaving as six. Do we care?”

Winston pulled the final shroud from the sack and chucked it to Desmond, who immediately started to put it on.

“I’ll go over the wall on my own,” Ferrin said.

“Can you make it?” Harvan asked.

Ferrin cracked his knuckles. “In my sleep. It’s not very high. And the security isn’t heavy. I’ll meet you back in the woods by where we left the yarn.”

“If they try to freeze you, be strong,” Harvan said.

“Count on it.” Ferrin turned to Winston. “Nice job controlling Katka.”

Winston gave an embarrassed smile. “It wasn’t the feat it might have seemed. They gave up much of their protection by inviting us inside. I have no doubt she is a talented mediator. But she’s not much of a shapemaker. Many mediators have very sensitive perceptions without powerful wills.”

“This is why people will never hear stories about Winston,” Harvan complained. “He just held a master shapemaker in suspension on her home turf, and he made it sound boring.”

“What about the guy blocking the way upstairs?” Cole asked.

Harvan stroked his beard. “He will have counted that five entered. But there are no alternate routes past him.”

“I’ve got it,” Ferrin said, bounding up the stairs. They could hear his urgent voice after he passed out of view. “Ryger says to come quick! The prisoner is missing!”

The guard came thumping down the stairs. Waiting off to the side, Harvan greeted the guard with his walking stick. The man stumbled under the blows but got a hand up, temporarily freezing Harvan, who remained still for barely a second before breaking free.

Desmond and Drake grabbed the man and hauled him to the hall with the cells. Cole brought the keys over and started testing them one by one, trying to open the door to the hall.

Suddenly, he couldn’t move. He exerted his will, but the grip was pretty secure. Drake slammed the guard against the wall and started punching him, and Cole was no longer immobilized.

He found the right key.

Behind him, Ferrin wrestled another guard down the stairs. Harvan helped drag

the second guardsman into the hall of cells.

Cole went to the cell where they had left Ryger, Katka, and the other guard.

“Different cell,” Harvan said. “They could be ready for us.”

Cole moved one door over and found the correct key on the second try. They deposited the men in the cell and secured the door.

“Should be clear sailing now,” Harvan said, running down the hall of cells. Everyone else followed in a hurry. They pounded up the stairs, through the retired kitchen, and into the empty common room.

“Now we walk,” Drake said, slowing down at the door.

“Exactly,” Harvan agreed.

They exited to the cobblestone street. Harvan led them toward the gate where they had entered. Ferrin went in the opposite direction.

“Walk quickly,” Harvan whispered. “I have an excuse.”

Cole tried not to look around too much. Or too little. Many men and women moved about in the walled village. He waited for a scream from behind. Somebody would call out an accusation at any moment, and then they would be running.

How long before an echo went into the prison to find it unmanned? Would that person sound an alarm immediately or first go searching for Ryger, Katka, and company?

Cole tried to trust his disguise. And his comrades. He fought to slow his breathing and calm his racing heart.

They reached the closed gate.

“Back so soon?” the same guard asked.

“Like you said,” Harvan replied jovially, “one prisoner.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?” the guard asked.

“Not exactly, but he accidentally presented an interesting lead,” Harvan said.

“You seem in a hurry,” the guard observed.

“Exactly right,” Harvan said. “We’re eager to act on this new knowledge. Our quarry is highly prized by Nazeem.”

“And Katka?” the guard checked.

“We left her with Ryger,” Harvan said.

The guard put his fists on his hips. “She’s supposed to walk you out.”

“She and Ryger got into some kind of disagreement,” Harvan said.

*With us*, Cole added in his mind.

The guard held up a hand. “Do you mind waiting while I send a runner?”

For the first time, Harvan sounded unpleasant. “Actually, yes. Katka had plenty of



time to report to you while we spoke with the prisoner. Instead she got tied up with Ryger.” He went from unpleasant to angry. “We came here to verify vital intelligence, with favorable results, but the situation is extremely time sensitive. If that gate were open, we would be running.” Harvan moved beyond angry to furious, though he didn’t shout. “You are obstructing our investigation. What is your name? Must I take off my hood and pull rank?”

“Open the gate,” the guard said. He waved them through. “She should have reported back first thing,” the guard apologized. “We’ll check it out.”

“Good choice,” Harvan said, breaking into a sprint.

Cole and the others followed. As he ran, Cole found himself holding back laughter. He managed to contain it with the thought that it could only be a minute or two before the guards found out what really happened and came in pursuit.

“Mask our conversation?” Harvan asked.

“Done,” Winston said.

“You came here with Honor?” Harvan asked Desmond as they dashed toward the trees.

“Yes,” Desmond answered.

“Where is she now?” Harvan asked.

“They took her to Gamat Rue,” Desmond said.

“Interesting,” Harvan said. “Not the Fallen Temple?”

“There was talk of that,” Desmond said. “But they settled on Gamat Rue in the end.”

“Did you guys find any leads on Destiny?” Cole asked.

“Nothing,” Desmond said. “I don’t think she ever made it to Deepwell. If so, she went in and out without getting caught. This was a dead end for us.”

“Disappointing,” Harvan said. “What would you suggest we do?”

“If you’re looking for Destiny, keep up the hunt,” Desmond said. “I can’t recommend how. I’m going to find Honor. I should have never lost her.”

They reached the trees. Looking back, Cole saw nobody in pursuit yet.

“Going to Gamat Rue would lead us backward,” Harvan said. “But finding Honor is a priority for us as well.”

“Leave it to me,” Desmond assured him.

“Gamat Rue will be much more formidable than Deepwell,” Harvan said. “You’ll need help.”

“Should we split up?” Drake asked. “I could join him.”

“Would you be willing?” Harvan asked.

“I’ll do whatever would most benefit your cause,” Drake said.

“There is a powerful echomancer at Gamat Rue,” Harvan said. “Nandavi. You could get permanently trapped there.”

“I could get trapped with you as well,” Drake said. “I’ve accepted the risks.”

“I largely brought extra manpower in case we needed to divide our efforts,” Harvan said. “Cole, what do you think?”

“Destiny is my mission right now,” Cole said. “But some of my friends might be at Gamat Rue. Joe, Jace, and possibly Mira. I’d love to send help.”

They raced through the trees in silence for a time.

Harvan stopped at a tree and crouched to pick up a piece of yarn. He handed it to Cole, then started taking off his robe. “The echoes at Deepwell know us by these disguises. Now would be an opportune time to shed them.”

Cole pulled off the robe and pocketed the yarn. Winston took Cole’s robe and Harvan’s and stuffed them in the sack.

“Are you still shielding us from scrutiny?” Harvan asked Winston.

“The best I can,” the other man replied.

“I sense Ferrin,” Harvan said. He turned to peer out into the trees.

A moment later the displacer ran into view.

“How’d it go?” Harvan called.

“I didn’t get away clean,” Ferrin said. “But clean enough. Sorry I was a little slow. I looped around wide to hopefully lead them off course. Are we abandoning the robes?”

“Take it off,” Harvan said. “But keep it.”

“Where are we heading?” Ferrin asked.

“Away from Deepwell for starters,” Harvan said. “We can’t accomplish anything if we get captured. Desmond wants to visit Gamat Rue to help Honor and perhaps some of Cole’s friends. Cole and I must stay after Destiny.”

“Do you know where to go next?” Ferrin asked.

Cole watched Harvan with great interest.

“I have an idea,” Harvan said. “But I only mean to share it with those who accompany me.”

“I offered to join Desmond,” Drake said.

“I could do that too,” Ferrin said. “Should I?”

“Let’s move,” Harvan said. They all started running together. “It might be most effective to part ways. The princesses are our top priority. I can’t pursue multiple princesses at once.”

“Drake and I would be happy to join Desmond,” Ferrin said.

“You may want to seek other help before invading Gamat Rue,” Harvan said. “It will be no small chore. The princess will be extremely well guarded.”

“Let us worry about that,” Drake said. “Others can direct us to Gamat Rue?”

“Many know the location,” Harvan said.

Desmond came alongside Cole. “I have a message from Honor to Destiny. Would you mind bringing it to her?”

“Of course not,” Cole said.

Desmond produced a small, tightly rolled scroll.

“A written message?” Harvan asked. “They didn’t confiscate it?”

“The message was disguised with weaving,” Desmond said. It seemed he was trying to say something else, but nothing came out.

“You tried to tell me something when we first found you,” Cole said.

Desmond attempted to speak again but failed.

“He’s bound somehow,” Harvan said. “Is that right?”

“Yes,” Desmond said. “I know certain things about Honor that I can’t express.”

“Do you know anything about Destiny’s location?” Harvan checked. “A clue you can’t reveal?”

“No,” Desmond said. “As far as I know, her whereabouts remain a complete mystery to everyone. I wish I could better explain why I can’t speak.”

“Does your silence have to do with the message?” Harvan asked.

“It’s related,” Desmond said. “The message was written by Honor and is meant for Destiny’s eyes only. I vowed not to read it or share anything I know about what it might contain.”

“Should we read it?” Harvan asked. “We made no oaths.”

“I cannot entrust the scroll to another unless they vow not to read it,” Desmond said. “I don’t think my binding will let me give it away unless the recipient promises sincerely.”

“Honor couldn’t have bound you,” Harvan said.

“An agent of hers did it,” Desmond replied. He tried to say something else but failed. “It’s hard to find words I can utter.”

“Happens to the best of us,” Harvan assured him. “Would it be dangerous for us to accept the message?”

“I don’t think so. But bringing the message to Destiny could be very important for Honor.”

“Up to you, Cole,” Harvan said. “Sounds like you’ll need to promise not to read the message and mean it.”

Cole hesitated. He hadn't thought carrying around the coin for Sando would be dangerous either. He knew too well that bindings could carry hidden threats. But just because he had been burned didn't mean it would happen every time. Desmond didn't seem to think it was too risky. And besides, this binding had been performed by an agent of Honor's! It was probably just a precaution to keep the message safe. Since Desmond was returning to Honor, if Cole refused, the letter would go undelivered. What if it had information vital to Destiny's protection? He had to accept whatever risk the binding might involve.

"I'll take it," Cole said. "I promise not to read it."

Desmond handed over the little scroll. Cole tucked it away.

They ran in silence for a time, enveloped by the music of the forest. Part of Cole wanted to go with Ferrin, Drake, and Desmond to help his friends at Gamat Rue. It would be nice to have a known destination, and such a relief to see Jace and Joe. If Nandavi and Sando were holding Honor there, was there a chance Mira remained there as well?

But what if Desmond had faulty info? What if both Honor and Mira were already at the Fallen Temple with Nazeem? What if postponing his search for Destiny let Nazeem claim her? Cole had promised Mira he would find her younger sister. If Harvan had a possible lead, they needed to pursue that first.

"If we're going to split up, sooner would be better than later," Harvan said. "It will confuse those from Deepwell who are trying to follow us."

"I have to go to Gamat Rue," Desmond said. "My sworn duty is to rescue Honor. I'd welcome any help."

"What do you say, Cole?" Harvan asked. "Should Drake and Ferrin join him?"

Cole appreciated Harvan asking his opinion but also felt a little intimidated. It was a big decision. Lives were at stake. "How much will we need Drake and Ferrin as we hunt for Tessa?" It was still a novelty to converse while sprinting without feeling winded.

"The next phase of our search for Destiny will rely more on stealth," Harvan said. "I'm convinced that nobody has found Destiny, meaning we're trying to find her rather than steal her back. Going forward, I don't expect numbers to be as important as they were at Deepwell."

That helped solidify Cole's opinion. "Then if Drake and Ferrin are willing, I'd feel better knowing they were helping Honor and maybe Mira."

"Sounds like a decision," Ferrin said. "We'll go to Gamat Rue with Desmond."

"My other friends are a kid named Jace and a man named Joe," Cole said. "They're

bright echoes, held at Gamat Rue.”

“I remember them,” Desmond said. “We’ll do our best to aid them.”

“In the town of Duplan, not far from Gamat Rue, you can find an echo named Giselle,” Harvan said. “She is connected to the Unseen and will undoubtedly help you. Tell her I sent you.”

“Much obliged,” Desmond said. “We’ll make for Duplan first. Gentleman, thank you for springing me from my incarceration. Would you be so kind as to point me in the correct direction?”

“That way,” Harvan said, gesturing off through the trees to one side. “Asking directions to Duplan shouldn’t arouse much suspicion.”

“It was good traveling with you,” Ferrin said. “Perhaps we’ll meet again.”

“I hope so,” Cole said. “Say hi to my friends.”

“Safe journey,” Drake said.

Desmond veered off in the direction Harvan had indicated. Drake and Ferrin followed. Before long, trees screened them from view.

CHAPTER  
— 23 —  
**DEADLANDS**

**S**o where are we going?” Cole asked after running in silence for a good while.

“Any guesses, Winston?” Harvan asked.

“It better be good,” Winston replied. “We just lost some capable men.”

“No guess?” Harvan checked.

“Should I know?” Winston asked.

“It would require an intuitive leap,” Harvan said.

“I’m at a loss,” Winston admitted.

“Music to my ears,” Harvan gloated with a smile.

“You got me,” Winston said. “I’m not a mind reader. Congratulations.”

“Any chance of us being overheard?” Harvan asked.

“I’m shielding us,” Winston said. “You’d know more about pursuers.”

“They’re a good ways back,” Harvan said. “Some went after the others. They’re not very organized. I’m taking us into the deep woods. Lonely country with few echoes they could communicate with to coordinate a hunt.”

“So we’re getting away?” Cole asked hopefully.

“Looks that way for now,” Harvan said. “If we keep up the pace, I think we’ll win our way clear. Nobody would be eager to follow us.”

“We’re going someplace dangerous?” Cole asked.

Harvan glanced at Cole. “If you could speak to anybody in the echolands right now, who would you choose?”

Winston gasped. “You know how to find her?”

“Winston may have guessed it,” Harvan said.

“Destiny?” Cole asked.

“That would be better,” Harvan conceded. “I mean somebody you don’t know.”

“You kept this from me?” Winston asked, annoyed.

“People tell me secrets because I keep them,” Harvan said.

“Until now,” Winston said.

“It’s an emergency,” Harvan said. “I’m hoping she’ll agree.”

“The Grand Shaper?” Cole guessed.

“Well done,” Harvan approved. “Prescia Demorri.”

“Mira’s aunt,” Cole said.

“How long have you known?” Winston asked.

“I explored these lands long before we met,” Harvan said.

“Where is she?” Winston asked.

“Near the heart of the Deadlands.”

Winston slowed.

“Keep running,” Harvan said. “They won’t be any less perilous if we delay our arrival.”

“What are the Deadlands?” Cole asked. The name didn’t sound very inviting.

“You know how we generally avoid disturbing music?” Harvan asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“We’re about to do the opposite.”

“You’ve been there?” Cole asked.

“Twice,” Harvan said. “Alone.”

“What’s it like?” Cole asked.

“Dead echoes gather there,” Harvan said. “The kind that are lost and confused but still functional.”

“In enormous numbers, if I understand correctly,” Winston said.

“There are no channels in the area,” Harvan said. “Efforts have been made to purge the Deadlands in the past. To help the dead echoes find rest. But there are too many of them, and they are too far gone.”

“Will they want to hurt us?” Cole asked.

“Some will try,” Harvan said. “We’ll avoid them.”

“We’ll run for our lives is more like it,” Winston grumbled.

“We’re already running for our lives,” Harvan said. “Think of it as a change of venue.”

“How can Prescia help?” Cole asked.

“My highest hope is that Destiny might have found her way there,” Harvan said. “Wouldn’t that be splendid? If not, consulting with the most powerful living weaver can’t hurt.”

“She’s been hiding in the Deadlands all this time,” Winston murmured.

“She had to hide somewhere,” Harvan said. “She built a refuge for herself. We’ll be

secure once we find her.”

“If you say so,” Winston said. “I can’t believe we’re running *toward* the Deadlands.”

“It’ll take some time,” Harvan said.

“If I had any sense, I would have gone with Desmond,” Winston said. “Gamat Rue doesn’t sound so bad all of a sudden.”

“The unknown always gets to you,” Harvan soothed. “I’ve been there. Trust me.”

“Nice try,” Winston said. “You’ve used that line one too many times.”

Harvan glanced at Cole. “You’re going to spook the kid.”

“I’m okay,” Cole said. “When you can’t avoid something like this, all you can do is be brave and get it over with.”

Harvan laughed. “Hear that, Winston. Best. Kid. Ever.”

Cole turned his head to conceal his proud smile.

\* \* \*

At length they left the woodlands behind, returning to endless vistas of lawns and gardens. Time lost meaning as they sprinted under the unchanging sky. Cole tried not to worry about the Deadlands. If Harvan had survived the place twice, why not a third time?

Harvan continued to direct them around towns and any echoes he sensed, and as a consequence, Cole never saw anybody. After crossing several channels, slipstreams became less common as well. Only the passing hills and fields marked their progress.

Eventually, the landscape started to look less groomed. There still wasn’t any dead vegetation, but Cole began to notice bare patches of ground and craggy ridges. The trees were less clustered, the grass wilder and longer, the way a little less smooth.

“We haven’t seen a slipstream in a while,” Cole mentioned.

“We’re now heading almost directly toward the fringe,” Harvan said. “Since we’re traveling away from the Source, we’re running parallel to most of the channels rather than crossing them.”

“The fringe is bad, right?” Cole checked.

“It’s less of a paradise,” Harvan said. “More hazardous. But there are fewer towns, and fewer shapecrafters, which we don’t mind. And it’s how we reach the Deadlands.”

“It’s bad,” Winston translated.

“Do the Deadlands reach all the way around the echolands?” Cole asked.



“Oh, no,” Harvan said. “They just cover this part of the fringe. There are many other areas, good and bad, depending on which direction you go.”

“Have you explored a lot of the fringe?” Cole asked.

“Not as much as I would like,” Harvan said. “If you venture too far, you don’t come back. I’ve seen why. As you get out there, the shift in the music is subtle, but pretty soon it lures you along, farther and farther, and all the music behind loses its savor. Everything starts to blur into the call of the Other.”

“Sounds like you’ve gone out far,” Cole said.

“Farther than most who managed to return,” Harvan said. “I’m curious to go farther, but I know eventually I’ll pass a point where return becomes impossible. I long to discover what the Other offers, but if I go there too soon, I may miss many explorations in the echolands. The Other will always be waiting. Who knows if I’ll ever get a chance to pass this way again?”

As they proceeded, the patches of dirt or rock became larger and more apparent. They weren’t ugly—they just didn’t look like part of a meticulously cultivated garden. The music of the empty patches was slower and heavier.

But their pace remained quick. As they progressed, they no longer saw groves of trees, just isolated loners here and there. The fields had a lower density of flowers, and the grass grew in patches. There were still no dead plants or leaves, but lots of soil, lots of stone.

The music up ahead became foreboding. It produced emotions like loneliness and despair, a soundtrack tailored for feeble wanderers crawling through the desert, deliriously looking for the right place to collapse.

“Is that it?” Cole asked.

“We’re getting close,” Harvan said.

“Should we eat?” Winston asked. “I see some carrots.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” Harvan said. “We’ll want to be at our best.”

They paused, and Winston uprooted a trio of carrots. Cole accepted one and took a bite. Crunchy and sweet, the first bite brought a surge of alertness.

“Wow,” Cole said. “I feel more awake.”

“We’ve run a long way,” Winston said. “It depletes energy and focus. You don’t tend to notice until it gets dire.”

They finished their carrots.

Harvan placed his hands on his hips. “The dead echoes up ahead are drawn to live echoes. I expect them to be extra captivated by Cole, since he’s bright. We don’t

need to treat them with courtesy. They are the shells of echoes. Their lifesparks moved on long ago. Our goal is avoidance.”

“What will they try to do to us?” Cole asked, unsure whether he wanted the answer.

“They want what we have,” Harvan said. “They want to feel alive again. Something about the Deadlands amplifies those desires. They came to the Deadlands because at some level they’re dissatisfied with their lifeless state. Some dead echoes can function normally for a long while. But if they avoid the channels for long enough, eventually they deteriorate and end up in places like this.”

“They’ll attack us,” Winston translated. “They’ll keep coming until we’re as dead as they are.”

“So we’ll be running,” Cole said.

Harvan winced. “Probably. But not at first. The echoes of the Deadlands seem drawn to motion. In previous visits, they mostly walked as long as I walked, and it seemed to curb their interest. Once I started running, they did too. We’ll see how long we can hold to a slower pace.” Harvan brandished his walking stick. “Once we speed up, don’t be shy about using that sword.”

Harvan started sprinting again. Cole ran at one side, Winston on the other.

“When do we walk?” Cole wondered.

“You’ll see,” Harvan replied.

As the depressing music up ahead gained dominance, the vegetation dwindled. The bare landscape became gnarled and craggy, dipping and rising haphazardly. Cole didn’t like how the contorted terrain limited his line of sight. Dead echoes could be lurking around the next rock pile or beyond the next incline.

Harvan slowed to a walk. “I hear some dead echoes. Not too many yet.”

The desolate surroundings looked empty to Cole. He could only hear the dismal music inherent to the landscape.

They advanced at a casual pace over dirt and stone. The uneven ground forced Cole to pay more attention to where he stepped than he had since arriving in the echolands. Harvan began turning a lot more sharply and frequently. Now that the dreary music fully enveloped them, Cole had to fight the urge to sit down.

“Are you guys tired?” Cole asked.

“It’s the music,” Harvan said. “The fatigue is in your mind, not your muscles. This music demands surrender. Resist.”

They weaved around stony projections and plodded across sandy stretches. Nothing grew here.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Harvan said. “Just follow my lead.”

Two men and a woman walked into view from off to one side. Cole was expecting the dead echoes to appear disheveled, like zombies, but these three looked normal.

“Excuse us!” the woman called, her voice a little too strident. “Could we have a word with you? I think we took a wrong turn.”

“Don’t answer,” Harvan muttered.

“Are you ignoring us?” one of the men called. “Are you turning your backs on us?”

“Keep walking,” Harvan said. “There are more coming. We don’t want a stampede.”

Others came into view from a different direction.

“You’re a cute one,” an older woman called, her eyes on Cole. “I bet the girls won’t leave you alone.”

Harvan increased his pace a little. Cole matched it. “Stay calm,” Harvan murmured.

They came around the side of a low ridge to find a mob of more than twenty people jostling toward them, men and women. They didn’t look dead. They weren’t decomposing, and their clothes were presentable. Cole found all eyes on him.

“There are more behind us,” Harvan said. “We’re accumulating a lot of admirers from many directions. More than I ever did alone. Maybe it’s having three of us together. Maybe it’s Cole’s brightness. They’re gathering fast. We don’t want to get surrounded.”

Up ahead Cole saw a gap in a steep wall of rock. The mob off to the side was picking up speed, not fully running yet, but trying to outpace one another.

“So much for walking,” Harvan said, breaking into a run. Cole stayed with him. Winston was a step or two behind.

The members of the mob started running as well, moving on a trajectory to cut off escape through the gap. Risking a look back, Cole saw more coming from directly behind.

It was now a footrace. As the gap neared, so did the fastest members of the mob. Harvan clobbered a man in the head with his walking stick, Cole slashed a woman’s outstretched arm, and then they were in the gap. Glancing back, Cole saw Wilson right behind him, and many people beyond him, running intently.

Emerging from the gap, Cole saw more scattered echoes ahead, all coming their way. Harvan weaved for a time, trying to keep the dead echoes from effectively converging. It took some artful maneuvering because the dead echoes approached from many directions.

Looking back, Cole saw the echoes behind them losing ground. They sprinted in bursts, but seemed to lack the determination to keep up a long chase. Some who had pursued them through the gap had already lost interest.

Harvan made it a priority to avoid groups, sometimes charging an individual echo to bash the person aside and create a new path. Cole ran hard and kept his sword ready.

There was never a break. At best, three or four echoes would remain in view. At worst, Cole saw more than a hundred. Survival would have been impossible without tireless legs.

Cole tried to shake his sense of desperation, but it was challenging. Time and again it looked like they might not make it around the next group.

Cole didn't have to use his sword too often. When necessary, Harvan reliably toppled echoes with his walking stick.

The dead echoes routinely cried out. Some sounded desperate.

"Help! Don't leave me! Come back!"

Others were strangely polite.

"A moment of your time? Excuse me? Just a moment, please?"

Some got angry.

"Don't you run! Where are you going? Stop this instant! Do you hear me? Don't you dare run!"

Cole did his best to block out the voices and also tried to ignore the melancholy music. The constant threat of attack kept him focused despite the interminable running. Cole felt like he had the football, and a couple of teammates to help block, but the field went on forever, and the other team had an endless supply of players.

An element of sameness pervaded the relentless chase. There were new rock formations to navigate, and new faces to evade, but the dynamics of the danger stayed fairly constant. They either had to run at top speed, using good angles to elude dead echoes, or else get gang-tackled.

Cole didn't suffer physically. His muscles never burned. His lungs didn't strain. But the constant threat of capture was mentally grueling. As the wild run dragged on, to help manage his frustration, Cole quit hoping for the chase to end. Better to grimly pretend there was no finish line. This was his life now.

Harvan did a superb job of avoiding critical threats like narrow places and large groups of dead echoes. Without his guidance, Cole doubted he would have lasted more than a few minutes. But Harvan had a knack for anticipating the positions of the dead echoes and reading the upcoming terrain. As long as Harvan, Cole, and Winston

stayed at a full sprint on relatively open ground, the dead echoes lacked the endurance and the teamwork to entrap them.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Cole finally asked.

“We’re getting closer,” Harvan said. “It may get a bit worse before it gets better.”

Before long, not only did Harvan have to use his walking stick twice, but Cole hacked a pair of dead echoes with his sword. The echoes scrambled back up after getting slashed aside, but by the time they recovered, Cole, Harvan, and Winston were out of reach.

Near misses became more frequent. Cole regularly had to help Harvan with his sword. He found that striking the head worked best. Sometimes Winston threw punches.

“Good job, Cole,” Harvan said after a particularly fierce flurry of fighting. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay,” Cole said.

“I’m fine too,” Winston said. “Remember me? The guy taking on hordes of echoes without a weapon?”

“You could pick up a stick,” Harvan suggested.

“Unless we find a really good one, I’ll punch and weave,” Winston said.

“You’re both doing well,” Harvan said. “We’re almost there. The biggest mob yet lies ahead of us, hundreds strong, right between our current position and our destination. I’ve been avoiding high ground so we don’t get surrounded.” He pointed to a ridge up ahead. “But I think we need to break that rule. I’m hoping that if we go up that ridge, we’ll draw the big group toward us and we can try to go around.”

“Toward us,” Winston said. “I love it.”

“It should make them clump together more,” Harvan said. “Right now they’re too spread out. I don’t think we’d make it around them.”

“You can hear all that in the music?” Cole said.

“With surprising detail,” Harvan said. “I can sense the shape of the terrain too. It’s all there if you learn to read it.”

“He does have his uses,” Winston said.

They raced up a rocky slope. Cole used his free hand to help climb as it grew steeper. The higher they got, the farther Cole could see. The dead echoes in the area seemed to take renewed interest as Cole and his companions gained altitude. Many who had stopped chasing them purposefully began heading their way again.

“We’re drawing a crowd from behind,” Winston warned.

“We have to be quick or we’ll get trapped up here,” Harvan said.

Cole found it extra weird to rush up the steep slope without getting winded. With his normal body, just walking up this incline would have made him tired.

When they reached the flat top of the ridge, Harvan hurried with them to the far edge. Cole's stomach dropped when he saw the multitude of dead echoes amassed up ahead. It looked like a sprawling crowd waiting for an outdoor rock concert. Beyond the throng Cole saw what had to be their destination—an oasis of tall fir trees and green grass.

“No,” Winston complained. “Seriously?”

The mass of echoes began to drift toward them. Some at the perimeter of the crowd were walking more quickly.

“We've got this,” Harvan said. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. “Hi, friends! We should talk!”

That did the trick. The crowd broke into a run, surging toward the ridge.

“Go,” Harvan said. “I'll keep their attention here for a minute. Head around them to the trees. I'll catch up.”

Winston patted Cole. “He means it.”

From behind them, on the other side of the ridge, echoes began to climb into view, most staring earnestly at Cole.

“They're coming from behind,” Cole warned.

“I know,” Harvan said. “Run.”

Winston and Cole started scrambling down the side of the ridge. Though Cole could no longer see Harvan, he heard him shouting, “Come on, hurry up! I have so many questions for you! And so many answers!”

Cole concentrated on not falling. This side of the ridge was steeper than where they had climbed. Loose pebbles skittered underfoot.

Glancing back, Cole saw Harvan following them recklessly, taking huge leaps. His haste was necessary. Many dead echoes were right behind him. There would be no doubling back.

Cole and Winston reached a ledge above a drop taller than the high dive at the town pool back home. Maybe fifteen feet!

“Jump!” Harvan called. “No time.”

Winston sprang, landing in a wild tumble on the rocky incline below. Cole tried to leap but couldn't. It felt like suicide!

“Jump!” Harvan insisted, closer now.

Cole had the Jumping Sword in his hand. What if it worked? He needed this. It had to.

He pointed the blade at a point farther down the slope and called, "Away."

There was no tug from the sword. No hint of his power.

So he jumped.

The ground rushed up to him, and he flopped forward, rolling violently. The impact should have snapped half the bones in his body. Instead, it didn't even hurt that much. He was shaken, but as he rose, he could feel that nothing was broken. Nor was he bleeding. Just kind of sore. He had dropped his sword. He retrieved it, and Harvan landed nearby.

"You're tougher than you think," Harvan said, rising. "Keep going."

Cole picked up his pace, descending the ridge more rapidly now that he knew a fall wouldn't hurt as it should. The dead echoes close behind added plenty of incentive.

"Don't try that off a giant cliff," Harvan said as the ground leveled out. "Echoes are more durable than physical bodies, but not indestructible. And they don't heal."

"What about soreness?" Cole asked. It was weird to be running for his life and not be gasping.

"Soreness will usually fade," Harvan said. "Any actual damage won't. Okay. Top speed."

Cole dug deep and sprinted with everything he had. From their lower vantage, he couldn't see the huge crowd of dead echoes blocking the way to the trees. But the memory was scary enough to make him push his limits.

The echoes behind them began to lose steam, but new echoes up ahead forced them to swerve quite a bit. When the big crowd came into view, Cole could appreciate the brilliance of Harvan's plan. The echoes were grouped much tighter and had gone close enough to the ridge that Cole, Harvan, and Winston had a real chance to race around them.

But the horde of echoes was coming fast, voicing a tangle of shouts. Some of the faster outliers still had a chance to cut them off from the green oasis.

Cole could tell he was forcing Harvan to run slower than he otherwise would. With his shorter legs, Cole simply wasn't going to outrun a healthy grown man.

"Are the trees safe?" Cole asked.

"Yes," Harvan said. "Once we're on the grass, they won't follow."

The greenery drew nearer, as did the dead echoes. A few of the fastest echoes managed to intercept them.

"One last brawl," Harvan said, smashing an echo in the face.

Cole chopped an outstretched hand, then dodged a young woman who lunged at him. The evasion slowed him a bit, allowing an older man to dive and seize his ankle.

Cole went down. He tried to kick free, but the man held fast. Cole slashed the echo's wrist, and he finally let go.

Cole looked up to see a flood of echoes descending on him, arms outstretched, faces crazed. Before he returned to his feet, he would be mobbed.

Then Harvan and Winston jumped in front of him. "Go!" Harvan roared, swinging his walking stick in huge, sweeping arcs. Winston lowered his shoulder and rammed an echo in the chest. The nearest echoes were driven back by the violence of the attack, causing those behind to stumble to a halt.

It was a momentary lull, a minor wave moving against the encroaching tide, but the pause let Cole return to his feet and sprint to the grass. The instant he passed from the dirt to the lawn, the music changed, the despairing strains of the Deadlands completely replaced by the refreshing refrain of grass and trees.

The difference was so abrupt that for a moment Cole felt disoriented, like he had awakened from a nightmare. Then he turned to look back.

Harvan fought off a couple more echoes and hauled Winston to his feet. As the dead echoes surged forward, Harvan and Winston bashed their way to the lawn, shaking off grasping hands, fighting for every step. With a final burst of effort, together they staggered onto the grass.



## CHAPTER

# 24

## PRESCIA

**R**elieved that Harvan and Winston had made it, Cole stepped forward, ready to defend them with the Jumping Sword, but the dead echoes acted like an invisible wall shielded the lawn. They pressed up right to where the grass began, but not a step farther.

“That was close,” Harvan said, leaning on his walking stick. “Let’s get away from the edge. No reason to tempt fate.”

The crowd of echoes milled about, yelling and complaining.

“Come back!”

“Don’t go there!”

“We need to talk!”

“You’re a very special boy!”

“It’s been so, so long!”

Cole hurried after Harvan, passing between fir trees, happy when the disgruntled echoes were screened from view. Before long they could no longer be heard, either.

“Thanks, guys,” Cole said wholeheartedly. “I was a goner.”

“I need a sword,” Winston murmured. “At least a stick.”

“Happy to help,” Harvan said. “You did great, Cole. It’s hard to believe you’re so young. You have the composure of a real professional.”

The compliment helped dispel some of the embarrassment Cole felt for getting tripped. “Are we safe now?” he asked.

“Until it comes time to leave,” Harvan said.

“I can’t wait,” Winston grumbled.

“Let’s hope our visit with Prescia will justify the trouble,” Harvan said. “It isn’t far now.”

By unspoken agreement, they walked. Cole basked in the gentler music, gratefully inhaling pine resin. Though he wasn’t physically tired, it was a luxury not to be

running. Nobody was chasing him.

“This place is big,” Cole said after they had walked for a few more minutes.

“Not tiny,” Harvan said. “Not enormous. We’re almost there.”

Between a pair of tall fir trees, a low cottage came into view, the walls composed of long, pale slabs of stone. As they drew near, the front door opened and a tall woman stormed out, slender with angular features. “Traitor!” she cried vehemently. “How dare you!”

“There’s a good explanation,” Harvan replied.

“You promised!” she accused. “Can nobody be trusted? You swore!”

“Not a bound oath,” Harvan said.

“I tried!” she yelled, no longer drawing closer. Hands on her hips, she waited for Harvan to approach. “You wouldn’t let me!”

“I don’t like entanglements,” Harvan said. “Trust me. This is a good thing. Once you hear me out, you’ll be glad I brought them.”

“Hear you out? How about see you out! Be gone!”

Harvan walked up to her. Cole and Winston hung back. “Prescia,” he said calmly. “You’re more beautiful than ever.”

“Sweet talk?” she cried. “Don’t even try, Harvan. When has flattery been anything but camouflage for a trap?”

“When it’s sincere,” Harvan said, taking her hand swiftly and giving it a slow kiss, his eyes on hers.

“I have gone to extreme lengths to protect this hideout,” Prescia said with a little less agitation. “How could you?”

“This is Winston Proust, my longtime associate and most trusted companion. The boy is . . . well, examine the boy and you’ll understand why we’re here.”

Prescia narrowed her eyes at Harvan, then turned her gaze to Cole. “Come forward, lad. What is your name?”

“Cole Randolph.”

“Give me your hand.”

Cole extended one arm. Her veiny hands had long fingers with short nails. Up close, she smelled like spices with a hint of smoke. The skin of her face looked stretched and shiny.

“You’re alive,” Cole said.

“A bright echo, yes,” she replied. “I’m not a former Grand Shaper yet. I’d like to keep it that way.”

She traced his palm with her fingers, turned his hand over, then turned it back.

Crouching, she gazed into his eyes. Hers were long, the outside corners tilting slightly up. He studied the rings and flecks of color in her amber irises.

“You’ve met a version of Dandalus,” Prescia said, surprised.

“The guy in the Founding Stone,” Cole said.

“How is that possible?” she asked.

“Owandell was using the Founding Stone to communicate with Nazeem,” Cole said. “I snuck into their secret meeting, but they found me. When I touched the Founding Stone, Dandalus helped me escape.”

Prescia ran a fingertip from Cole’s palm to his wrist. Suddenly, she gripped his hand tightly, and her head turned to Harvan. “He’s had contact with the Mare! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Showmanship,” Harvan said simply, giving a toothy smile. “Are you less angry?”

“Possibly,” Prescia said, her eyes returning to Cole. “How did you encounter the Mare?”

“She saved me,” Cole said. “Twice. Once in the normal world, once here. At least I think it was the same horse. Both times she drove away bad guys who were trying to capture me. In the normal world, she looked a little fierier, but that was at night. Here she let me ride her.”

Prescia gasped. “She did? Yes, she did. Interesting. What do you know of the Mare?”

“I thought it was weird she could be in the afterlife and the normal world,” Cole said. “Could one be her echo? Also, the colors of her coat kind of flow like smoke.”

“You have no notion how she came to be?” Prescia inquired.

“Not really,” Cole said. “But she’s my favorite horse ever.”

“Why are you here in the echolands?” Prescia asked.

“I’m looking for Destiny,” Cole said.

“Destiny tends to find us all,” Prescia said.

“Your niece Destiny,” Cole clarified.

Prescia looked at Harvan, who appeared smug. “Yes, I see,” she said. She released Cole. “Winston, your hand.”

Winston complied. She examined it front and back. “You can weave here.”

“I have some talent for it,” Winston said.

She stared into his eyes. “Will you divulge my whereabouts to anyone?”

“Not under torture,” Winston said. “Not if imprisoned for a thousand years.”

She threw his hand down. “He means it. But how can one ever be sure? People mean what they say until they have reasons to change their minds. Everyone

disappoints. Everyone fails you.”

“Not us,” Harvan said.

Prescia swiveled toward her doorway. “Is that so? Come on, you dashing ignoramus. Let’s move this discussion indoors.”

Cole followed her into the cottage. A bedroom was visible through an open door. The tidy living room had a bench and a wooden rocking chair. Prescia gestured at the bench and claimed the rocker. Cole sat down beside Harvan and Winston.

“You are damaged, Cole,” Prescia said.

“My power was attacked by Morgassa when we defeated her,” Cole said. “Can you fix it?”

“No, my boy, the damage exceeds anything I could remedy,” Prescia said. “You’re from Outside. You wish to return home.”

“Yeah,” Cole said. “How’d you know?”

“It’s what she does,” Harvan said.

“Not that anyone bothers to listen,” Prescia said. “Want to know the quickest way to deafen people? Tell them the truth.”

“Do you know where we can find Destiny?” Cole asked.

“What about finding your way home?” Prescia countered.

“Time for that later,” Cole said. “One crisis at a time.”

“After you find Destiny?” Prescia asked.

“No, then I have to find Honor and Mira and help them defeat Stafford and Nazeem.” He didn’t even mention the part about saving Jace and Joe from whatever they were currently facing. It was embarrassing to admit how much trouble his mistake with Sando had caused, and how many people he needed to save in order to make up for it.

“Tell me about Honor and Mira,” Prescia said.

Cole explained how Honor and Mira had ended up in the echolands. He told about Durny looking for Mira. And he shared how Desmond, Ferrin, and Drake had gone in search of Honor.

“There is much work ahead of you,” Prescia said. “You are not new to aiding the princesses.”

“I’ve been working with Mira,” Cole said. “We got her power back. Honor’s and Constance’s too. Now we just need to help Destiny and Elegance.”

“You’ve met Harmony,” Prescia said.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “She’s who told me Honor and Destiny were in trouble.”

“I tried to admonish my younger sister about Stafford,” Prescia said. “I didn’t know

the particulars, but I felt this coming. I knew her children and the kingdom would suffer. Of course she didn't believe me. Any true prophet knows the experience—we sense the future, we offer accurate warnings and guidance, and none will heed us. Sometimes I wonder if it would be better not to know. It would certainly cause me less anguish. In Harmony's defense, Stafford was a different man when she wed him."

"Is Destiny here, by chance?" Harvan asked.

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Prescia said. "You'd be the last man I would tell, even with a bound oath, you scoundrel."

"Didn't I have a good reason to bring them here?" Harvan asked.

"Defendable reason or not, you broke my trust," Prescia said. "Cole, you wish to find Destiny?"

"Yes," Cole said. "I promised Mira."

"Destiny is not here," Prescia said.

"Do you know where I can find her?" Cole asked.

"I am the most gifted living weaver in Necronum," Prescia said. "Destiny is my blood relative. And I have no idea. Neither, thankfully, does Nazeem, Stafford, or any of the others hunting her. Part of me wonders if they understand who they are chasing."

"What do you mean?" Cole asked.

"I do not pretend to love my sister," Prescia said. "I did however feel some affection for my nieces. Until Destiny. That child frightens me."

"Why?" Cole asked.

"She is by far the most powerful of Harmony's daughters. And her gift is the rarest. Some weavers have a knack for cajoling knowledge from echoes. Some weavers have a higher power—the ability to simply know things about the past, present, and future. But Destiny leaves us all behind. The best of us only see bits and pieces. I know of none who see like Destiny. She is less a girl with power, and more like power in the form of a young girl."

"Didn't she lose her power?" Cole asked.

Prescia laughed bitterly. "Only the greatest fool would attempt to steal so prodigious an ability. Enter Stafford and Owandell. Yes, they stripped her power. But the imbeciles sought to control it. Harmony is not without her gifts, with the names of her children as the best evidence. How do you outsmart destiny itself?"

"You don't?" Cole guessed.

"Exactly," Prescia said. "The shapecrafters tried to channel Destiny's ability into a chosen vessel, a very gifted young shapecrafter. Instead, the power entered one of

their horses.”

It took a moment for the implications to sink in. “The Mare?” Cole guessed.

“Very good,” Prescia said. “You were rescued by Destiny’s power. You rode Destiny’s power. And this is why I suspect you are destined to find my niece.”

“Maybe I didn’t betray your trust,” Harvan said excitedly. “I may just be a humble servant of destiny.”

“Nice try,” Prescia snapped. “If I were you, Harvan, I would stop reminding me you are present.”

“That’s a tall order for him,” Winston murmured.

“Let’s just see how he does with it,” Prescia said.

“Will the Mare help me find Destiny?” Cole asked.

“The Mare is an embodiment of Destiny’s formidable power,” Prescia said. “We can all be grateful for any help we receive from the Mare, but to expect her assistance would be foolhardy. You may very well never cross paths with the Mare again.”

“Is that a prophecy?” Cole asked.

“Just common sense,” Prescia said.

“I call the horse Thunder,” Cole said.

“I call her the Mare,” Prescia replied.

Cole stared at Prescia. “You can’t help me find Destiny?”

“I never said that,” Prescia said.

“She only said she doesn’t know where Destiny is,” Harvan reminded everyone.

Prescia stared at him coldly. Winston nudged him. After a moment Harvan folded his hands in his lap and bowed his head.

“You can help?” Cole asked.

“Can and will,” Prescia said. “I know an opportunity when I see it.”

“An opportunity I provided,” Harvan grumbled, eyes on the floor. Winston nudged him harder.

“How can you help?” Cole asked.

“By following Harvan’s example,” Prescia said.

Harvan looked up, smiling.

“Not by breaking a trust,” she stated emphatically.

Harvan dropped his head again.

“But by sending you to consult with one who knows more than I do,” Prescia said.

“Aren’t you the best weaver?” Cole asked.

“In Necronum, yes,” Prescia said. “In the echolands, not even close. I recommend you visit She Who Stands at the Summit.”

“She’s a myth,” Winston said, then covered his mouth with both hands.

“A myth I have conversed with,” Prescia said.

Harvan looked up, eyes bright. “You know how to find her?”

“I do,” Prescia said.

Harvan pumped a fist. “Spectacular.”

“The journey will be fraught with peril,” Prescia warned, glaring.

“Naturally,” Harvan said. Then he pantomimed locking his lips with a key. “I’ll keep quiet.”

“How do we find her?” Cole asked.

“She stands atop the Farthest Mountain, deep, deep in the fringe,” Prescia said.

Harvan drummed the bench between his legs, a huge grin on his face. Winston slumped.

“Do you know how to get there?” Cole asked Harvan.

“No idea,” Harvan said cheerfully. “Always wanted to try. Figured I should wait until I was ready to move on to the Other.”

“These two can accompany you to the base of the mountain,” Prescia told Cole. “They can even go up part of the way with you. But you must scale the summit alone.”

“Why?” Harvan asked.

“If more than one person tries to approach her, she will cast you all from the mountain,” Prescia said.

“Can I go after he finishes?” Harvan asked tentatively.

Prescia shrugged. “If you must. But accessing She Who Stands at the Summit is no small task. Few find their way to her mountain. Most fail to reach the top. You must pass whatever test she deems appropriate.”

“Do you think I can do it?” Cole asked.

“I know of no other way you could find Destiny,” Prescia said. “If you are indeed meant to locate my niece, you will find a way to reach the summit.”

“The lady at the top will know?” Cole asked.

“She Who Stands at the Summit is wise and powerful beyond reckoning,” Prescia said. “She will be able to guide you.”

“How do we find the mountain?” Cole asked. “Harvan doesn’t know the way.”

Prescia stood up. “Wait here.”

She walked into the bedroom.

Harvan put an arm around Cole and squeezed him. “What did I tell you?” he whispered. “Isn’t she great?”

“She’s not too happy with you,” Cole replied quietly.

“It’ll pass,” Harvan said. “Point is, we have a lead now. Not just a lead—an epic adventure!”

“He gets like this,” Winston said, arms folded.

Prescia returned carrying a shuttered silver lantern. “See this, Cole.”

“Is that . . . ?” Harvan asked.

“The Weaver’s Beacon,” Prescia said. “An heirloom passed down from one Grand Shaper to the next. Our guiding light in the echolands.”

Harvan’s eyes widened. “Does that mean Cole is the next—”

“Of course not,” Prescia snapped. “I’m loaning it to him.”

“Doesn’t the Weaver’s Beacon make this oasis possible?” Harvan asked.

“It does,” Prescia said.

“Then how will you preserve your refuge if Cole takes the beacon?” Harvan asked.

“I won’t,” Prescia said simply. “I’m returning to Necronum. I mean to go help your other friends rescue Honor. She was always my favorite.”

“What should I do with the Weaver’s Beacon?” Cole asked.

“You should not lose it,” Prescia said. “Can you please repeat that back to me?”

“I shouldn’t lose it,” Cole said.

“Keep it with you at all times,” Prescia said. “Go on, repeat.”

“I’ll keep it with me at all times,” Cole said.

“You don’t lend it to these clowns or anyone else,” Prescia said. “Understood?”

“Yes,” Cole said.

“I told the beacon where you mean to go,” Prescia said. “It will not mislead you. Trust it over your senses, or Harvan’s. Far out in the fringe, sweet music can be as dangerous as foul.”

“How will I know where it wants me to go?” Cole asked.

“Take it,” Prescia said, holding it out.

Cole grabbed the lantern by the handle on top. It was lighter than he expected. The lantern did not hang straight down. It tilted, gently pulling in a certain direction.

“Feel that?” Prescia asked.

“Yes,” Cole said.

“Let the beacon guide you,” Prescia said. “You won’t have to cut back across the central echolands. You’re on the proper side to continue out into the fringe. The light of the beacon will drive away dead echoes. And help conceal you from enemies. And it will maintain your energy better than food. Those who rely on tampered shaping or who embrace dark energy and music will find its purity disruptive.”

“Thank you,” Cole said, amazed.



“Don’t forget to open the shutter,” Prescia said.

“We can just walk out of the Deadlands?” Winston checked.

“Time is short,” Prescia said. “I suggest you run. But the dead echoes will not harass you.”

“I’m speechless,” Harvan said.

“And yet you’re talking,” Prescia replied.

“It’s an incredible gift,” Harvan continued.

“It’s a loan,” Prescia reminded him.

“We can never repay you,” Harvan said.

“I require no payment,” Prescia said. “My duty is to protect Necronum. I have bided my time long enough. Now is the hour to make my move. We are fellow soldiers in the same campaign.”

“If you’re going after Honor, don’t you need the beacon?” Harvan asked.

“Not as much as Cole does,” Prescia said, concern entering her gaze. “He will not find She Who Stands at the Summit without it. My instincts tell me it’s up to him to find Destiny. The Outskirts have never faced greater peril. Dire forces are in motion. If I can’t trust my instincts, I may as well go ride a slipstream.”

“We won’t fail you,” Harvan said.

Prescia took a step toward him. “You had better not. You brought this boy here, Harvan. He is your responsibility. He must succeed. You and your sidekick pay whatever price is necessary to protect him.”

Harvan saluted. “It was already my intention.”

“This could be your finest hour,” Prescia said. “Your greatest story. Or it could negate all the others.”

Harvan hesitated, as if trying to resist speaking, then went ahead with it. “People will still tell the stories either way. They’re pretty ingrained.”

“Not if there is no Outskirts,” Prescia said. “And now, I must away. I suggest you do the same.”

“Hey, you know?” Harvan said with a chuckle. “If you’re abandoning your refuge, I guess it doesn’t really matter that I told these two the secret.”

“You still broke your promise,” Prescia said. “Don’t forget that I’m abandoning the refuge because you brought them here. But if you succeed in your mission, all will be forgiven.” She winked at Cole and disappeared.

“Is her body nearby?” Cole asked.

“It must be,” Harvan said. “Not sure what the Necronum side looks like right here. Probably not very hospitable.”

“That’s all the rest we get?” Winston asked.

“We came here looking for a reason to run,” Harvan said, rubbing his hands together. “Now we have it. Ready, Cole?”

Cole held up the lantern and opened the shutter. A mellow white radiance shone forth. “I think so.”

“Good enough,” Harvan said. “Let’s find out if the Farthest Mountain lives up to its name.”

CHAPTER  
— 25 —

## FARTHEST

**T**he Weaver's Beacon kept dead echoes away as promised. Cole saw plenty, but the lifeless echoes acted like Cole and his companions were invisible.

As they ran, Winston kept staring at the lantern. After some time he spoke up. "I'd almost rather have to run from the dead echoes."

"How come?" Cole asked.

"You're holding the fate of Necronum," Winston said. "It's the Grand Shaper's most storied talisman. And we have it!"

"Of course we have it," Harvan said. "Name a hero more worthy."

"Prescia Demorri," Winston said.

"She gave it to us," Harvan said. "So we must be worthy."

"Or she's horribly desperate," Winston said. "What if she gave us the keys to the kingdom because it's burning down?"

"Of course the kingdom is in peril," Harvan said. "It's our job to save it."

"No pressure," Winston said.

"I'm glad we're not being chased," Cole said. "The beacon wasn't doing much good just hiding her. Now she's joining the fight, and we have a better chance of fulfilling our mission."

"See, Winston?" Harvan said. "What do I keep telling you? Best kid ever!"

Cole smiled, then cringed inside—was it wrong of him to accept all that praise when his actions had endangered his friends, especially when he didn't know whether he could repair the damage? Mira, Jace, and Joe were suffering while he got applause. Harvan had it wrong. Worst kid ever. Most gullible kid ever. As always, Cole did his best to push those thoughts away.

Running with the lantern was a little awkward, but not too bad. Just like his legs and lungs didn't tire from running, his arm didn't tire from holding it, though he

switched hands from time to time for variety. The trickiest part was getting used to not swinging his arm as he sprinted.

Without being chased, the Deadlands went by calmly, though the people roaming around still seemed kind of creepy. They all acted so lost. Cole kept reminding himself that they were just shells of people, like imprints.

Beyond the Deadlands, vegetation returned, though not as orderly as the gardens of the central echolands. None of the vegetation was sick or dying. No leaves had fallen; no grass was dry. But the shrubs and trees were more spread out and random, and there were less frequent flowers. Still, Cole was relieved to see plants again and thrilled to escape the depressing playlist of the Deadlands.

“How far will it be to the Farthest Mountain?” Winston asked.

“Better not to wonder,” Harvan said. “I’ve traveled more than most, and I’m prepping my mind for a long run.”

“I’m starting to question if I’m doing the afterlife all wrong,” Winston grumbled.

“Are you serious?” Harvan asked. “What would you rather be doing? Lounging around the Hall of Glory? *That’s* monotony. At least out here the scenery changes! We’ll get to see distant reaches of the fringe that few ever lay eyes on. And we’re still involved in world events.”

“See how I get suckered into these things?” Winston asked Cole.

“He makes a good argument,” Cole said.

“Right,” Winston replied. “Then before you know it, you’re running for your life from countless dead echoes across a nightmare landscape. Next thing you know, the fate of the world is on your shoulders as you’re hunted by the forces of evil. Who wants to be that guy?”

“Somebody has to do it,” Cole said.

“Exactly,” Harvan enthused. “So it might as well be somebody competent.”

Winston moaned.

Cole laughed.

They kept running.

Eventually, the music ahead shifted, growing darker and more mysterious. The lantern pulled Cole toward it.

“Have you heard that before?” Cole asked.

“I’m blazing new trails here,” Harvan said. “It’s new to me.”

“Me too,” Winston added.

After topping the next rise, a black-sand desert spread out before them, a dark ocean of rolling dunes.

“You sure that beacon isn’t broken?” Winston asked.

“It’s pulling that way,” Cole apologized.

“It doesn’t sound evil,” Harvan said. “Just . . . ancient, and full of secrets.”

The sand turned out to be exceedingly fine. With each step their feet plunged in almost to the ankles. Their running strides kicked up shadowy plumes behind them. Going up the dunes, Cole felt like he lost half a step for each one he took. Running across the sand would have worn him out in minutes in the mortal world, but he still didn’t tire. It was just frustrating to have his pace slowed.

The dunes went on and on, rank after rank. They climbed and descended, climbed and descended, climbed and descended. A few times Cole slipped running down the far side of a dune. With each fall he strove to protect the lantern. Though it got jostled, the light continued to glow, and it didn’t show any damage.

After a great while, the dunes flattened into a sandy expanse, and then the music began to change as the sand gave way to what looked like gray fragments of pottery. The angular fragments rattled and snapped underfoot but offered a bit more support than the sand, and the music became less ominous.

At one point they spotted a distant tower with hopeful music. Harvan mentioned that it might be worth investigating, but as they moved in that direction, the beacon tugged them away.

The terrain became orange dirt, interrupted by steep ridges and small, sparse trees with golden foliage. The music held an edge of danger but was also fairly majestic.

The dirt gave way to a surface of hard, flat stone, white with gray swirls. It made for easy running, but after some time only white flatness was visible in all directions. With no landmarks, Cole began to lose the sense that they were making any progress. The subtle, soft music was the closest to an absence of sound Cole had experienced in the echolands.

From the distance, Cole began to notice hints of a sweet melody. Only catching it in snippets, he strained to hear it better. The little he could discern seemed to be the prettiest, most welcoming music he had ever heard. And the beacon was taking them in that direction.

“Do you guys hear that pretty music?” Cole asked. “Kind of far off?”

Harvan laughed. “You’re finally starting to apprehend it? I wondered how long it would take.”

“The homesong has never been more distinct,” Winston said.

“You guys have been hearing it?” Cole asked.

“For a long time,” Harvan said. “It’s much louder than the music of this emptiness.”

That wasn't true for Cole. "I can barely hear it," he confessed.

"That's why we didn't mention it," Harvan said. "We were glad you were deaf to the summons. The call of the Other is probably the biggest threat out here on the fringe. When it gets hold of people, they wander off in a trance, never to return."

"What I hear sounds beautiful," Cole said.

"Try not to focus on it," Winston said.

"Like it or not, you'll hear it more clearly over time," Harvan explained. "It will only get harder to resist."

"The beacon is dampening the effects," Winston said. "Even so, I've never heard the homesong this powerfully."

"Think of your duty," Harvan said. "Don't let your mind get drawn away."

Cole tried not to listen to the call. He still caught little snatches.

"I'm curious how strong the homesong would be without the beacon," Harvan said. "Should Cole shutter it for a moment?"

"Are you mad?" Winston asked. "The call might grab all three of us. Plus, the beacon conceals us."

"You're right," Harvan said. "I just get curious."

"You want to hear the music more distinctly," Winston said. "You want to wallow in it. You want to gargle it without swallowing. I don't blame you. So do I. But that's a deadly game."

Cole wanted to hear it more clearly too. "Are you guys going to be all right?" he asked.

"We both have a good deal of experience resisting," Harvan said. "If we start to wander off course, snap us out of it. We're not just going to disappear."

"Our lifespark could escape," Winston said.

"Not if our minds hold firm," Harvan said. "Destiny needs us. Prescia trusted us. The world could fall without us."

They kept running. Cole tried not to listen as the call of the Other rang out more clearly. Between the unchanging landscape and the unchanging sky, Cole lost all sense of time. He thought back to other places he had been—the orange terrain, the black-sand desert, the Deadlands, the paradise of the central echolands, Necronum, Junction, Zeropolis, Elloweer, Sambria, and Arizona. He needed to remind himself that there was more to existence than running across this changeless expanse.

Finally, little bumps began to take shape on the horizon before them.

"You two see those hills?" Winston asked.

"Yes," Harvan confirmed.

The hills gradually came closer, rising higher. Beyond them, a lone mountain began to take shape, dark, steep, and surreally tall.

“Now that is a mountain,” Winston said.

“I’ve never seen its equal,” Harvan said. “I know of no serious mountain in the echolands.”

“The beacon is pulling straight at it,” Cole said.

“Hear the music yet?” Harvan asked.

“A little,” Winston said.

“Not yet,” Cole said.

“You’ll like it,” Harvan said. “The sound fits.”

As the foothills approached, Cole began to hear their music. At the beginning of the hills, the song of the mountain came through, its magnificent music dramatic and powerful.

“I hear it now,” Cole said as they started into the hills.

“Impressive, right?” Harvan said. “I think we’ve made it.”

“How long have we been running?” Cole asked.

“I usually have some sense of the passing time,” Harvan said. “I’m at a loss now. Many days. Possibly weeks. The black dunes threw me. And the white plain was worse.”

They continued across the foothills, the forbidding mountain looming above them. Cole considered the steep stone surfaces, angular and raw. The lofty summit appeared unreachable.

“We’re going to climb that?” Cole asked.

“Keep trusting the beacon,” Harvan said. “We’ll go part of the way with you.”

“Wait,” Cole said, “what will you do when I take away the beacon?”

“We’ll do as we’ve always done,” Harvan said. “We’ll hold on.”

“The music of the mountain is strong,” Winston said. “It might help counter the call of the Other.”

“We’ll test it at the base of the mountain,” Harvan said. “Not by closing the shutter. We’ll walk away and see how we fare.”

“Not a bad idea,” Winston said.

Compared to crossing the white plain, the mountain drew rapidly nearer. The hills became darker and stonier, piling up against the base of the mountain itself.

Harvan halted. After going nonstop for so long, the absence of running felt very strange to Cole.

Hands on his hips, Harvan looked around. “I’d say we’re on the shoulders of the

mountain now. Should I walk away?"

"Go ahead," Winston said.

"Sit tight," Harvan said, jogging away from them.

The music of the mountain now saturated Cole enough that he could no longer hear the beckoning melody of the Other. Hopefully, that was a positive sign.

Harvan kept going until he looked to be about an inch tall. After a few minutes he returned.

"Wow," Harvan said. "It won't be easy. I didn't intend to go so far, or stay away so long. It wasn't easy to return. I focused hard on our mission, and the music of the mountain, and I barely made it back."

"Should I try it?" Winston asked.

"Don't go as far as I did," Harvan said. "You'll feel it after about ten steps."

"Ten paces," Winston said resolutely. He then took ten steps away counting each one. He stopped. Then took another. And another.

"Winston?" Harvan called.

Winston turned, his eyes closed, his mouth bent in a dreamy smile. He swayed.

"We're going to lose him," Harvan muttered. "Winston! Return at once!"

Winston started walking away.

"Stay here," Harvan said to Cole. He ran after Winston and shook his shoulder. Winston shrugged away from him, so Harvan grabbed an arm and pulled. By the time they reached Cole, Winston was blinking and looked disoriented.

"I've never felt anything like that," Winston said.

"Did you try to focus on the mountain?" Harvan asked.

Winston shook his head. "I had no control. I was gone. Our mission dropped out of my mind. The homesong never claimed me like that before. I didn't hear the mountain. I didn't hear my own thoughts. I was too . . . relaxed. Blissful."

"What do we do?" Cole asked.

"We'll climb part of the way together," Harvan said. "When you go on ahead, I'll take responsibility for Winston. I'll pin him down if I must. The duty might actually help my focus."

"I'll try harder," Winston said. "Maybe it'll help that I know what to expect."

Cole stared at the two men. What if he returned from the mountaintop and they were gone? It would be awful!

Harvan held up a finger. "Hear that?"

"What?" Winston asked, cocking his head.

Harvan looked around. "Someone is coming. Fast. Too fast." He looked up, then



pointed. "There!"

Cole followed his finger to five specks in the sky coming their way. "Birds?" Cole asked.

"Wind riders," Harvan said. "I've heard rumors. Never actually seen any. What are they doing out here?"

"Coming toward us," Winston said.

Cole squinted. The specks were drawing rapidly nearer. He could now make out wings.

"How'd they find us?" Winston asked.

"Maybe they noticed us when we walked away from the beacon," Harvan said.

"Why are they anywhere near this place?" Winston asked. "We're way off the map."

"Could they be good guys?" Cole asked.

"Shapecrafters," Harvan said. "I hear their music."

"Do we hide?" Cole asked.

"No point," Harvan said. "They've already spotted us. They're coming right at us. Cole, if I say the word, you run for it."

"But—"

"No argument, Cole," Winston said.

"All else aside, we can't let the Weaver's Beacon fall into their hands," Harvan said. "Let them land. I'll talk to them. We'll find out what they want. If it turns into a brawl, Cole, you run up that mountain as fast as your legs will carry you. Strong wills, gentlemen. Don't let them bind you."

As the shapecrafters flew closer, Cole could see that they were men with gliders on their backs. They swooped down and landed perhaps a hundred yards away. They wore the wings like backpacks and shrugged out of them after landing.

Cole recognized one of them. "Sando," he said.

"Really?" Harvan asked. "That guy is everywhere!"

As the five shapecrafters came closer, Cole saw that one was a woman. Sando took the lead, revealing his bare gums with a wide grin.

"Young sir!" he called. "I thought our paths might cross again! And not a moment too soon! You have strayed too close to the Other."

"Come no closer," Harvan said firmly, stepping in front of Cole.

"Back away," Winston suggested to Cole out the side of his mouth.

Cole retreated several paces.

Sando came to a halt ten yards from Harvan. "You are in terrible danger, young

sir. This mountain is haunted by a vicious fiend. Very little lies beyond this accursed place. Let us carry you to safety.”

“How did you find him, Sando?” Harvan asked.

“It helps to anticipate where your quarry needs to go,” Sando said. “Young sir is looking for someone. The fiend of this mountain has considerable knowledge. Let’s keep this civil, Harvan Kane. You don’t want to meet your end here. Who would tell the story?”

“What do you expect us to do?” Harvan asked.

“What any reasonable person does when outnumbered and outclassed,” Sando said. “Surrender.”

“Is that my reputation?” Harvan asked. “Reasonable?”

Sando pointed at Harvan with two fingers. The four shapecrafters flanking Sando began gesturing and chanting. Suddenly, Harvan and Winston were not moving. Harvan trembled. Winston stayed still as a statue.

Cole felt nothing. He drew his sword. “Get out of here, Sando.” He stepped closer to Harvan and Winston, bathing them more fully in light from the beacon. Both men shook off their paralysis.

Sando glared at the female shapecrafter. “The boy,” he murmured.

“I’ve never felt such a slippery target,” she complained.

Sando narrowed his eyes. Then they widened. “You have an interesting lamp, young sir. Unusual craftsmanship. It resembles one that is meant to stay safely hidden. Surely you have not brought it into jeopardy at the periphery of the echolands?”

Harvan twirled his walking stick and looked over his shoulder at Cole. “Time for you to go.”

“Let me help,” Cole said, holding the beacon higher in one hand while swinging his sword with the other.

Harvan glared at him. “Don’t worry about me. I live for these moments. We all have a part to play. Go. Now.”

Cole stared at Sando, whose trickery had led to the capture of Mira, Jace, and Joe. At the moment he wanted nothing more than to find out how many chops it would take to physically destroy an echo.

Sando grinned even wider. “Come, giver of silver. I believe you have a grievance to settle with me. We can talk of your squealing little friends.”

“Cole,” Harvan said, his voice hard. “Now.”

“Listen to him,” Winston said.

Cole turned and ran. Tears stung his eyes. Harvan and Winston were right. It was

his duty to run. But it still felt cowardly.

He glanced back. Winston wrestled with a shapecrafter. Harvan thumped a man to the ground with his walking stick, then immediately fell back. He wasn't attacking. He was maneuvering to keep himself between the shapecrafters and Cole. At least they weren't paralyzed.

Cole stumbled, dropping his sword to catch himself. He kept the beacon from touching the ground. He picked up the Jumping Sword and sheathed the blade, then sprinted with all his might, following the tug of the lantern.

## CHAPTER

# 26

## TEST

The lantern wasn't just leading Cole up the mountain, but around it as well. He climbed diagonally, stealing glances back as best he could without slowing down. His last view of the fight involved a pair of shapecrafters holding Winston down while another pair grappled with Harvan. Sando stood off to one side, watching the brawl.

The old beggar didn't look up at Cole.

Nobody was coming after him yet.

Would they give chase once Winston and Harvan were entirely subdued? Could they use their gliders to catch up? Would they simply wait for him to come down?

All Cole knew for sure was that his current job was to charge up the mountain. Harvan and Winston had provided an opportunity. To waste it would make their sacrifice meaningless. Cole needed to protect the Weaver's Beacon. He needed to make it to the summit and discover how to find Destiny. Then he could worry about the rest.

He ran hard, his path snaking ever higher over smooth, dark, angular rocks. Every upward glance made him uneasy—cliffs on top of cliffs stretched to stratospheric heights. If looking up felt intimidating, how would it be to look down? Cole had always been good with heights, but unclimbable precipices were another matter. He had no reason to believe he could access the colossal peak except for the lantern pulling him forward.

What would happen to Harvan and Winston? Was there a chance Harvan and Winston would overpower the shapecrafters and fight their way free? What if they couldn't? Would the shapecrafters march them away from the mountain until they were entranced by the call of the Other? Or might Sando take them prisoner?

Cole tried to console himself that both men were already dead. The thought wasn't very comforting. Neither man was ready to move on. If they were forced out of the echolands, wasn't that basically a second death?

The Weaver's Beacon led Cole onto a narrow path. Sometimes it vanished, only to reappear a few hundred yards later. He began to find stone steps chiseled into the rock. Maybe there was a way up after all!

Cole stayed at a run. Who knew when Sando and his henchmen might come after him? His duty was to give them as little chance as possible to stop him.

The path wound higher up the mountainside. The lantern followed the trail perfectly, curving through switchbacks and guiding Cole across barren areas where the path became hard to discern. Sometimes the path went into little tunnels or along deep clefts in the rock. The way became ever steeper. Some of the stairs were stacked so vertically that Cole felt like he was climbing crude stone ladders.

Cole tried not to look down, but every so often, moving along ledges or clifftops, he glimpsed arresting drops. As the way became almost constantly steep, he was unable to maintain a pace equal to running, but he climbed as quickly as he could.

After a long while he reached a wall where the stone steps dwindled to nothing more than handholds gouged into the rocky face. There was no way Cole could proceed with the Weaver's Beacon in his hand, so he looped the handle over the hilt of the Jumping Sword at his waist. The comfortably spaced handholds were shaped for easy grabbing, but Cole still felt nervous. Even without the panic of vertigo, a serious drop awaited if he slipped. Cole didn't care how tough echoes were—a fall from this height would be deadly. The danger demanded respect.

Higher and higher he climbed, the Weaver's Beacon wobbling at his waist. Every so often he would scan the sky, but he saw no gliders, or anything else for that matter. He was so close to the mountain that it was hard to gauge how far he was from the summit. He would reach the top of one precipice to find another awaiting above it.

The ascent began to feel like crossing the black-sand desert or the plain of white stone—he climbed without ever expecting to stop. The summit was up there someplace, but actually arriving seemed unrealistic. Perhaps the mountain was growing taller at a faster rate than Cole could climb. It sure seemed that way as one steep ascent followed another. Cole would not have been surprised to look down and see stars.

At long last he reached a broad ledge. The beacon at his waist pulled him toward a neatly carved staircase. This one wasn't crude like the previous stairs. It looked like it belonged in a castle.

As Cole approached, a voice filled his mind, accompanied by fierce music drenched in power.

*Who dares to scale my mountain?*

Cole paused, then spoke aloud. "My name is Cole. I need your help finding someone."

*On your knees, then.*

Cole obeyed.

*Close your eyes.*

Again he complied.

*Lie down.*

He did.

*Awake.*

Opening his eyes, Cole froze.

He was no longer on a mountain.

He was under a black curtain, on a cool concrete surface.

He had lifted the fabric just enough to see out. He was in a basement. *The* basement. The supposed spook alley where Jenna, Dalton, and so many others were taken to the Outskirts by slavers.

There was Jenna now! Heading down the hole in the floor. He wanted to call out before her head ducked out of sight, but slavers were everywhere, and it all felt too real. If he cried out, he would be captured as well. The last of the kids followed Jenna down, some shrieking as they dropped from the final rung.

Was this real? It sure felt authentic. But he was actually somewhere else, wasn't he? This had happened months ago. He was already in the Outskirts. Where? Sambria? No, Elloweer had come after that, then Zeropolis, then Necronum. That was it! Necronum.

But where in Necronum?

And why had he returned to the basement? Could he have gone back in time?

This didn't feel like a dream or a memory. He felt the weight and texture of the curtain. His senses were alert, his conscious mind active. He felt awake.

There stood Ansel in his wide-brimmed hat and long weathered duster, checking his pocket watch. Secha was beside him, squat and swarthy, her clothes like layers of tattered rags.

"Excellent timing, Ansel," she said. "This was a good plan."

"Think we found what we were looking for?" Ansel asked.

Cole closed off his view. He had heard these words before. Why was he here, now, hearing them again? Could his time in the Outskirts have been a dream? No way. Too much had happened. It had all felt so vivid! But it seemed hazier now, many of the details slipping away.

He heard people walking around. The slavers were packing out the last of their stuff. He knew what they were doing. He knew what they looked like. He had seen it all before. Cole had no doubt about what was going to happen. Secha and Ansel would be the last to leave. They would speak one more time. He couldn't recall the exact words, but he knew basically what to expect.

Could he change how things happened? The kids were already down the hole. If he came out now, he would just get caught. Ansel had his sickle.

If this had happened before, how was it happening again? If the Outskirts had been an elaborate dream, why did he know what was coming next?

"Are we finished?" Secha asked.

Cole raised the fabric enough to see.

Ansel was checking his pocket watch. "Just over six minutes left." He gazed around the room. "Doesn't matter how we leave the place. Nobody can follow us. We're done here."

Secha climbed down the manhole, and Ansel followed. "Do we cover it?" her voice asked from out of sight.

"No need."

Cole knew they were gone. Nobody else was in the room except for a little girl dressed like an angel, hiding under a different curtain.

He knew about the girl because this had all happened before. Had he really gone back in time? Was this a chance to change the outcome?

Last time he had followed his stolen friends down the manhole. And he had ended up in the Outskirts. Before long he was enslaved alongside them. So many adventures had followed. But he was stuck there, risking his life day after day. His chances of getting home were bleak. Nobody even knew he was missing. Everyone had forgotten him. And supposedly, even if he made it home, he would soon get drawn back in.

In a far corner of the room the little girl crawled out from under a heap of curtains. She was small and skinny, with wavy auburn hair and freckles. Cole remembered her angel costume, down to the crumpled wings and the tilted tinsel halo.

The girl looked around furtively. She approached the manhole cautiously and peered down. Then she turned to the stairs.

"Hey," Cole called. "Delaney!"

The girl whirled and jumped, wide eyes searching for who had spoken. "Hello?" she asked hesitantly. "Do I know you?"

Cole came out from under his curtains. "Don't be afraid. I was hiding too."

“I saw you guys come in,” she said. “I was part of another group.”

“You hid behind the curtains and got covered when they came down,” Cole said.

The girl gave him a strange look. “Yes. How did you know?”

“I bet you wanted to warn us, but they would have just sprung the trap earlier and caught you, too.”

“Are you psychic or something?” she asked.

“Just a good guesser,” Cole said. “Our friends are in huge trouble. You should climb out a window and go for help. Break it if it won’t open. Get the police.”

“Aren’t you coming?” Delaney asked.

Cole folded his arms and stared at the hole in the floor. That was the question. He supposed he could do whatever he wanted. Was this really a second chance?

“I don’t know,” Cole said.

“Are you thinking of following them?” Delaney asked, her inflection implying it was a bad idea.

Cole gazed at one of the basement windows. His family was that way. He could go home and see his mom, dad, and sister. He could be there in less than ten minutes. He could help explain what happened to Dalton and Jenna. Would anyone listen to him? Would anyone believe him?

“Are you all right?” Delaney asked.

“Just thinking,” Cole said.

Would Dalton and Jenna be any worse off if he didn’t go after them? Dalton would wind up working at the Silver Lining in Merriston. He would probably be safer at the confidence lounge than fighting the High King and Nazeem. They hadn’t found Jenna, so she would presumably remain at the Temple of the Still Water in Necronum.

But what about Mira? As his mind turned to her, memories came flooding back. Would she have been taken by the legionnaires at Skyport? Maybe. No, wait, she would have probably died at the proving grounds. The cyclops would have gotten her. What about Honor and Constance? Who would stop Carnag? Morgassa? Roxie? Would any of the princesses get their abilities back?

“Hello,” Delaney whispered, waving a hand in front of Cole’s face. “We need to get out of here. What if somebody comes down from upstairs?” She glanced at the hole. “What if some of those guys come back?”

Cole looked at the window. It would be such a relief to go home. But could he live with knowing his friends were trapped? Could he live with Mira getting killed? Or if she somehow survived, getting captured by her father? Could he live with the princesses never regaining their powers? With Carnag and Morgassa and Roxie



running wild? All the Outskirts could be destroyed. That included Dalton, Jenna, and all the others.

“I’m going to follow them,” Cole said. “I’ll be careful. Tell the police what happened.”

“Are you sure?” Delaney asked. “They’re fast and strong. They might catch you.”

“They have my friends,” Cole said. “It’s what I’m doing. My name is Cole Randolph. Try to remember me. Try to remember us. Please tell our parents what happened. You better go.”

“Be careful,” she said.

“You too,” Cole replied. “Hurry!”

Delaney moved toward the window, and Cole went to the hole and started down the metal rungs. Soon his foot couldn’t find the next one. Darkness yawned below.

Cole took a deep breath. “Here we go again,” he murmured, stepping off the rungs and plunging into the darkness.

His eyes snapped open.

Cole was not falling.

He was not newly arrived in the Outskirts, seated on scorched dirt, surrounded by a symmetrical ring of twelve stone pillars.

He was in his bed.

At home. His real home, where he lived with his parents and sister.

It was morning.

Cole sat up. He wore his standard sleep uniform—a T-shirt and basketball shorts.

Had that all been a crazy dream? It must have been. It had even started repeating at the end.

Wow. It had felt very real.

His Halloween costume rested on the chair in his room. He was going to be a scarecrow that got used for archery practice. The tips of the arrows were broken off so he wouldn’t be bringing weapons to school.

Cole got out of bed.

What was going on? Had it really all been a dream? Had he not yet gone to school on Halloween? Had Jenna not been dressed as Cleopatra? Had Dalton not yet been a sad clown? Had they not gone to a haunted house in a basement?

What about Mira? And Jace? And Twitch? And Joe? And Honor? And Constance? And . . . Hunter?

Wait a minute.

In his dream he had a brother.

A brother who had gone to the Outskirts a couple of years before him.

A brother who had supposedly occupied the spare room across the hall.

Cole turned away from his door. He was scared to look. What if the spare room was full of stuff that belonged to Hunter?

No. That was crazy. It had all been a dream.

It was no big deal to go look.

Except it was.

Because Cole had broken out in a cold sweat. Deep inside lurked an unsettling certainty that none of it had been a dream.

He had to walk across the hall and see.

Cole went out into the hall.

The door to the spare room was closed.

What was it supposed to look like inside? Cole could not form an image of the spare room in his mind. Surely he had gone in there. But as he thought back, he couldn't remember any specifics.

He opened the door.

Cole felt like he had been punched in the gut. No, worse, stabbed in the gut. And the knife was twisting.

The bed was unmade, like somebody had slept in it and left in a hurry. There were some clothes on the floor. Jeans. Shin guards. A light layer of dust covered everything.

On the dresser by the door stood numerous soccer trophies. And a framed team photo. An individual photo of Hunter Randolph sat beside it, the brother from the dream. His name was on the trophies too.

Cole backed out of the room.

He didn't want to see any more.

Cole returned to his bedroom.

He had forgotten his brother. His parents had forgotten his brother. His sister had forgotten him too. Cole hid his face in his hands. His time in the Outskirts wasn't a dream.

What was he doing here? Why was he home?

He had to get back.

His friends would not be captured and taken there until this evening. But could he now keep Dalton and Jenna from going there? What if he brought police officers to the house where Ansel was trapping kids? What if he helped catch the slavers?

But then what about Mira? And her sisters, and all the people in the Outskirts? And

Hunter, who had been so thoroughly forgotten by the family that his messy bed remained untouched two years after he had vanished?

Cole had to let it all happen. There could be no police, no warnings. He had to let the same kidnappings transpire. If he changed things, it might not turn out right. He might not help Mira escape Skyport and beat Carnag. He might not save Honor and stop Morgassa and defeat Roxie and go to Necronum.

Necronum.

Where Mira, Jace, and Joe were taken to the echolands. They had been taken, and it was his fault. He had made a deal with Sando. He had to save them. And he had to help Tessa. It was what Mira had most wanted. He had promised.

He had been doing his best. He had crossed over to the echolands at the Temple of the Robust Sky.

And eventually, he had met Harvan, Winston, Ferrin, and Drake.

And Prescia.

He had gone to find Destiny. He owed it to Mira.

That was his current mission.

He wasn't really in his bedroom. This was some kind of dream. This was an illusion.

He was really on a mountain.

"I have to find Destiny!" Cole yelled, heedless of what his mother, father, or sister might think.

He remained in his room.

"Get me out of here!" Cole shouted. "There isn't time for this! I have to find Destiny!"

Everything went black.

Cole was lying on his side.

He could feel the rock beneath him.

He opened his eyes.

## CHAPTER

# 27

## SUMMIT

Cole was back on the mountain, the stairs before him.

*Come.* The word penetrated his mind, reverberating with power.

Cole stood, facing the stairs. He unhooked the beacon from his hilt so he could hold it in his hand. Before he started up, Cole peeked over his shoulder.

He was high!

The echolands spread out behind him forever, looking like a map or a model from this altitude. How high was he? Was any mountain on Earth this tall?

*Come.*

Cole rushed up the stairs two at a time.

The steps ended at the summit.

There wasn't much more space at the top than in his bedroom. A woman stood there, clad in dark gray robes, turned so he was looking at her profile. Her eyes stared into the distance, long black hair tumbling almost to her waist, her skin as pale as moonlight. She was of medium height and quite lovely. Her throbbing music was imbued with deep mystery and sorrow and, at this proximity, overpowered the song of the mountain.

"Cole Bryant Randolph," she intoned, her voice resonant and solemn, her eyes staying fixed on the horizon.

"That's me," he said.

"You have traveled an improbable path to reach me," she said.

"I guess so," Cole said. "What are you staring at?"

"I gaze out beyond the fringe, awaiting the supreme evil that departed ages ago. One day it shall return. We will destroy each other, and I will at long last leave the echolands behind. Until then, I assist where I am able."

"Can you help my friends?" Cole asked. "I left them at the bottom of your mountain."

“The attack occurred beyond my reach,” she said. Her words remained in a solemn monotone. “Your assailants seemed to know the irregular boundaries of my influence. Your friend Harvan has been taken. The strain was too much for the other one, Winston. His lifespark has fled to the next phase. The shapecrafters kept his lifeless echo.”

Cole bowed his head and fell to his knees. Winston was already gone? And Harvan was captured! Everything kept getting worse!

“I understand your grief,” the woman said. “Your comrades sacrificed much to deliver you to me.”

Cole looked up at the woman. Her face remained impassive. Her eyes gazed into the distance.

“You never look away?” Cole asked.

“The evil I await will come swiftly,” she said. “I must never divert my attention.”

“You’ve been doing this for a long time?” Cole asked.

“Since not long after the Outskirts began,” she replied.

“Who are you?” Cole asked.

“You already know,” she replied. “I am She Who Stands at the Summit.”

“But who were you before?”

“I am one of a small number who framed the Outskirts,” she said.

“You helped shape the Outskirts? Did you know Dandalus?”

“You met a shadow of him connected to the Founding Stone,” she said. “He was the greatest of us.”

“He told me his job was to make the Founding Stone,” Cole said.

“Which also meant his job was to physically create the Outskirts,” she said. “The Founding Stone initiated the process.”

“You must be powerful,” Cole said. “I know you’re waiting for some evil, but there are already lots of problems in the Outskirts. Before long there might be nothing left to protect.”

“You wish for my direct intervention,” she said. “Even if I would risk turning my back on the evil I await, I cannot leave this post.”

“Why not?” Cole asked.

“I wield considerable power,” the woman said. “But no matter how great your power, there is a price to remaining in the echolands. I have lingered for a very long time. I established a sanctuary here upon this mountain. Were I to depart, the call of the Other would immediately claim me.”

“You?” Cole asked.

“The call accumulates influence over time,” she said. “The echolands were never meant as a permanent home for anyone. This is a place of transition, a place to let go of one existence and move on to another. Your comrade Winston has graduated to a wondrous realm. We will all eventually follow.”

Cole stared at the woman. “Do you know where I can find Destiny?”

“I do not. But I know who can provide the information you seek.”

Cole pounded his fists against his forehead. “No offense, but do you know how many times I’ve heard this?”

“I know all that you know. Knowledge is power in the echolands. Few endeavors can benefit you more than finding those who guard it. You hoped to find Destiny at Deepwell. Harvan took you to Prescia in search of an answer. Prescia referred you to me. My Weaver’s Beacon enabled you to reach this summit.”

“Your Weaver’s Beacon?”

“As the first Grand Shaper of Necronum, I created it long ago.”

Cole held up the lantern. “Well, good job. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. It was made to be used. Now you have one last person to visit. He will have the answers you desire.”

“He’ll know where to find Destiny? For sure?”

“He knows where to find her. He can reveal how you might return to your home. He can advise you on how to confront Nazeem.”

“That sounds worth the trip,” Cole said. “But what can you tell me?”

“You have not yet realized the nature of your enemy,” she said.

“Nazeem? I saw him.”

“But you do not yet comprehend his identity.”

“Should I?”

“You have sufficient clues to understand.”

Cole thought for a minute. “I know Owandell works for him. I know Nazeem taught people shapecraft. I know he kept himself a secret for a long time. I know he’s imprisoned at the Fallen Temple. I know he wants the princesses and is also after me. I know he plans to break free soon. Do you know more?”

“I am one of the six who imprisoned him long ago,” she said, unblinking eyes staring into the distance.

“You imprisoned Nazeem?”

“With the help of the other founders of the Outskirts.”

“What do you know about him?”

“You have met the only other of his kind in this world,” she said. “We imprisoned

him as well.”

Cole’s jaw dropped. “Trillian? Wait a minute. Nazeem is the other torivor?”

“He has not always used the name Nazeem. When we faced him, he went by Ramarro.”

Cole’s mind raced. It made sense. Trillian didn’t know the fate of the other torivor, only that he must have been captured. Trillian could shape differently and more powerfully than anyone Cole had met. Trillian had believed the rules of shaping could be changed. And that’s what shapecraft did—shape the shaping power.

Of course Nazeem was the other torivor! The Fallen Temple was equivalent to the Lost Palace. Like Trillian, Nazeem had been manipulating people from within his prison. If Nazeem got free, it would be like Trillian getting free. It would mean the end of the Outskirts.

“You are reaching the correct conclusions,” the woman said.

“We’re in the echolands. Is Nazeem an echo?”

“He is not, though we imprisoned him here. Thankfully, we did not confront the torivors at the same time. We went up against Nazeem first, in Necronum. The battle was close. We had practiced our craft for centuries, and Nazeem was new to this world, or else the outcome might have been different. We managed to lure him into the echolands and imprison him here.”

“So if he gets out, he can come back to life?” Cole asked.

“If he can find a way beyond the barriers that imprison him and cross to the other side, yes, he could fully return to life. He brought his physical body here. His body and lifespark are joined in a way I do not understand. We tried to imprison Trillian in the echolands as well, but he refused to cross, and the six framers together lacked the power to force him. We settled for entombing him beneath the Lost Palace. Similar barriers that hold Trillian contain Nazeem.”

“Can Nazeem defeat your barriers?”

“The two torivors are the most talented natural shapers we have ever encountered. Given enough time, anything is possible, no matter how securely we bound them. Our top priority must be to keep Nazeem imprisoned. If he breaks loose, no power in this world will be able to stop him.”

Cole thought about that. “Supposedly, he’s almost free. What should we do if he gets out?”

Her voice remained solemn and calm. “We could fight and perish. Or we could surrender and watch as he remakes the Outskirts according to his desires.”

“You don’t sound too bothered by that,” Cole said. “Or anything, really.”

“Do not mistake my focus on the distant evil for indifference,” the woman said. “I have suppressed much of who I was to stand at this post.”

“What evil?” Cole asked.

“A fiend unconnected to the torivors,” she said. “Something older, inherent to the echolands. Only I can stop it. Harbor no concerns. I will do my duty.”

“Did you have a name?”

“Once, long ago. Perhaps I will again after I finally move on. Until then, I am She Who Stands at the Summit.”

“There isn’t a way to destroy Nazeem?” Cole asked.

“If we knew how to destroy him, we would have done it without hesitation.”

Cole considered what else he needed to know.

“I have compassion for you, Cole,” she said. “I understand what you have lost. I know what you hope to regain. I can see your memories as if I lived them, including the lost memories of your brother, Hunter.”

“I still have those memories?” Cole asked.

“Yes. They are veiled from your conscious mind, but they remain. I used them to show you his room.”

Cole took a deep breath. A small corner of his mind had patiently waited for Hunter’s identity to be an elaborate hoax. He believed Hunter was his brother, it had to be true, but he couldn’t help leaving some defenses up in case it was all a ruthless trick. It was nice to have Hunter’s identity confirmed from an outside source.

“Was that a test?” Cole asked. “Making me choose to come to the Outskirts again?”

“I had to confirm your level of commitment,” she said.

“What if I had failed?”

“I could have sent you to the Other. I could have sent you down the mountain. I could have still permitted you to speak with me.”

“It felt so real,” Cole said.

“In some of the ways that matter most, it was real,” she intoned.

“Trillian sent a message to me that the Outskirts might fall without my help,” Cole said.

“I’m aware.”

“Was that true?”

“The torivor cannot lie. He believed what he told you. Given all you have achieved, and your presence here, it seems he could be right.”

“He also thought I could get my power back.”

“You have a unique and remarkable talent,” she said. “I am sorry it was desecrated



by Morgassa. You hope that I can heal you, but I cannot.”

“What about the guy you’re sending me to visit?”

“If anyone can help, he can.”

Cole frowned. “Prescia said you were the wisest person in the echolands.”

“Very few know about the Warden of the Light. His existence is perhaps the greatest secret in the echolands. I only send you to him because of the import of your mission.”

“What if he sends me to some new secret person?” Cole asked, feeling frustrated again. “Somebody you don’t know. How many mountains am I going to climb?”

“As many as you must,” she answered. “But I do not believe he will send you to another. He will help as he is able. Normally, he permits three questions. Hopefully, it will be enough.”

“Not even the Grand Shaper knows about him?” Cole asked.

“No. Only one other person in the echolands knows of his existence.”

“And you can give me directions?”

“I can have the Weaver’s Beacon lead you to him.”

“I’m being chased,” Cole said.

“I am aware. And you have lost your companions. I can help you get away.”

“How?” Cole asked.

“I will send you a good distance from my mountain,” she said. “As I mentioned, my boundaries are irregular. My influence extends farther than you might guess along a few routes in certain directions. Far enough that those flying shapecrafters will struggle to follow. The beacon will conceal you from their weaving and their songreading.”

“How do they fly?” Cole asked.

“Shapecraft. They whistle up an artificial wind with their abilities. It should not be possible. But this is what shapecraft does. It manipulates the rules.”

“Can they come up here?” Cole asked.

“I control the skies near the mountain,” she said. “They ambushed you just beyond one of my nearest borders.”

“What about my other friends?” Cole asked. “Can you see them?”

“Mira was taken to the Fallen Temple. I can’t see inside that location. Nothing blinds my vision like excess shapecraft. Honor was taken to Gamat Rue. Jace and Joe never left there. I can’t see into Gamat Rue, either. I only know your friends were taken there through your memories. Desmond, Ferrin, and Drake are nearing Gamat Rue. As is Prescia. Durny was captured and brought inside the Fallen Temple.”

“Can you see into Necronum?” Cole asked.

“Only the echolands,” she replied.

“You can’t see Destiny?” Cole wondered.

“I saw her earlier. She could have been on her way to Deepwell. Then she disappeared.”

“Could she have gone to the Other?”

“I would have sensed that. She is hidden somewhere. The Warden of the Light should be able to help.”

“Do you need to do something to the Weaver’s Beacon?” Cole asked.

“It is done,” she said. “The beacon will direct you to the Warden of the Light. The most direct route would take you across some of the central echolands. Instead, I designed a route that will keep you far from other echoes.”

“Probably smart,” Cole said.

“Use caution. As you approach the warden’s dwelling, you will venture far into the fringe. Resist the call of the Other. The beacon will let you avoid most hazards, but you will have to cross the Pass of Visions. You will see things that frighten you. Ignore them. Do not fight them. They can only attack if you touch them. You may also see people who want your help. Again, ignore them. If you touch them, it will be taken as permission for them to engage with you.”

“Sounds like a fun place,” Cole said.

“Trust the beacon,” she said. “It will not fail you. Are you ready to go?”

“Is there anything else I should know?”

“If the Warden of the Light chooses to help you, he will have many of the answers you seek.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “If?”

“Be brave. I believe he will aid you. Please give him my regards.”

Cole sighed. “Fine. I guess I’m ready. What do I need to do?”

“Give me permission to send you,” she said. “It makes the experience more comfortable.”

“You have my permission.”

“Farewell.”

## CHAPTER

# 28

## VISIONS

Cole felt like he simultaneously shrank and stretched. Everything became a sideways blur. His insides lurched like he was accelerating, but it looked more like he remained still while the world streaked by.

A feeling of nausea hit, and the frantic motion stopped abruptly. He stood near a bridge over a slipstream. The gray, powdery ground seemed inhospitable to plants. Only a few small, tidy trees grew within view.

The beacon gently pulled toward the bridge. Evidently, he was supposed to cross it.

Cole turned in a circle, eyes searching the horizon. The Farthest Mountain was nowhere in view. Her domain apparently included some far-flung tentacles.

Hopefully, he had enough of a head start to baffle Sando.

His eyes swept the sky, but he spotted no gliders.

Cole started running.

He tried not to dwell on Harvan and Winston. There was nothing to do about Winston. It was horrible, but irreversible. He had to be rational about it. And he would worry about Harvan later. His list of people to rescue was getting absurd.

As he ran, Cole could not help missing his companions. Unreasonable or not, he wished there was some way to undo Winston going to the Other. He wished he could save Harvan now, partly for selfish reasons. It was no fun to run alone. The lack of company left him feeling desolate and vulnerable.

At least he possessed the beacon. He had a crucial mission and a way to reach his destination. That was big. Maybe he would finally learn where to find Destiny. And maybe he could get some information about how to get home. Was that too greedy to hope? Based on what he had learned from She Who Stands at the Summit, if anybody could help him, it would be the Warden of the Light.

Cole wondered how Jace, Joe, and Honor were faring at Gamat Rue. Hopefully, they got to see one another sometimes. Hopefully, Desmond would manage to free them.

He worried about Mira. If she was at the Fallen Temple, she was with Nazeem. Would he try to take her power again? Would he play games with her mind? Was she suffering?

He tried not to envision the possibilities too vividly.

Cole also thought about Dalton and Hunter. Were they looking for Jenna? Could they have found her by now? Everything seemed so bleak, it was encouraging to imagine something good happening.

There was plenty to wonder about and worry over.

But mostly he had to keep running.

He also kept an eye on the sky.

Just in case.

The terrain changed as he ran. Cole traversed deserts and climbed hills. He crossed plains and passed through woods. In one forest the enormous trees had thick trunks and looked as tall as skyscrapers. It made Cole feel out of scale, as if he had become tiny.

He sprinted across a landscape of smooth, black pebbles. He followed a trail through a jagged range of yellow and red mountains. He plunged blindly across an ocean of grass more than twice his height.

Occasionally, he crossed channels, but thanks to the beacon, he always arrived where a bridge was present. The beacon steered him away from intimidating music and sometimes guided him away from inviting songs as well.

While crossing a wide plain made of transparent crystal, Cole began to discern the call of the Other more powerfully than he had yet heard it. The more detail he could apprehend, the more beautiful it sounded. The music felt familiar, as if he had somehow forgotten his favorite song along with his most cherished feelings, and they were all connected. The homesong promised wholeness and rest and joy.

He reminded himself about Winston losing his lifeforce to the Other. He concentrated on his duties and the people depending on him. He thought about Destiny and Mira and Dalton and Jenna.

And he tried not to think about how much more clearly he might hear the homesong if he shuttered the beacon. He tried to embrace his loneliness and decide he deserved the company of that inspiring melody.

He tried to concentrate on things other than the beckoning call. The crystal plain

looked kind of like really clear ice. He could stare a long way beneath his feet. He wondered how far he had come. How many miles had he traveled? How many days had he run? It seemed he had gone farther than he had with Harvan and Winston, but it was hard to be sure. The duskday never changed.

At last the crystal plain ended, and Cole found himself running across a rolling prairie with occasional gigantic bushes. The call of the Other continued to beckon.

Would it be such a crime to shutter his beacon? Just for a little while?

He recalled Winston getting enthralled by the homesong before he had walked very far from the beacon. Shuttering the lantern might be the last thing he ever did. It might also let enemies pinpoint his location. He had to remember that the beacon was also concealing him. The call of the Other might sound sweet, and promise an end to his misery, but he couldn't get lured in. Too many people were relying on him.

Ominous music sounded up ahead, but the beacon kept leading him forward. A distant wall came into view. As he drew closer, Cole realized the wall was the size of a mountain, stretching as far he could see to either side.

Directly before him, right where the beacon was leading him, Cole saw a gap in the mighty barrier.

Could that be the Pass of Visions?

It was the most probable candidate so far.

As Cole approached, the barrier looked more like a huge cliff rather than a wall, though it was almost perfectly vertical, and the top was strangely level. By the time Cole reached the gap, the menacing music of the cliff drowned out the homesong. Cole felt relieved, although the new music was not welcoming.

With the beacon urging him forward, Cole entered the pass at a full sprint. Steep cliffs rose at either side, separated by about thirty yards of hard-packed dirt. The floor of the pass sloped up at a gradual incline, winding enough that Cole couldn't see how far it went.

A rumbling from up ahead caused Cole to slow down. Could it be a rockslide? He came to a stop when a large woman floated into view from farther up the pass, hovering toward him. She wore a white blouse, a long gray skirt, dark stockings, and flat black shoes. Her hair was up in a messy bun. Cole had seen this dressy schoolteacher before. She had mutilated his shaping power as she died.

It was Morgassa.

Cole's reflexive instinct was to turn and run. Instead he stared. The beacon kept tugging him forward.

"Hello, Cole Randolph," Morgassa said with a smile. "Fancy meeting you here in

the realm of the dead. How about a rematch without all your little friends?”

Cole watched her glide in his direction, her feet a few inches above the ground. She was at least eight feet tall.

Could this really be her? It looked exactly like her. It sounded like her. He was in the afterlife. She could be here.

Still, if this was the Pass of Visions, it had to be a trick.

But what if it wasn't?

“I see you brought your sword,” Morgassa said, her voice silky. “Are you going to leap around like a grasshopper again?” A huge sword appeared in her hands. “Or perhaps it doesn't perform so well here in the realm of echoes. Perhaps you'll have to face me in a fair fight.”

What were the chances this pass had one of the beings he most feared blocking the way? It had to be a vision customized to intimidate him.

Either that, or he was about to get killed.

Morgassa was scant seconds away from him. “I challenge you to a fair fight. Defend yourself or die.”

Cole reached for his sword but resisted drawing it. There was no way he could take out Morgassa singlehandedly. She was too powerful.

If she was a vision, and he attacked, she would be free to fight him. If she was real, and he attacked, he stood little chance of winning.

So his best bet was to not attack. He had to hope she was a vision.

Morgassa had almost reached him. She raised her sword to strike. She looked completely real. If he was wrong, he was about to get chopped in half.

Cole took his hand off the hilt of his sword.

Her blade remained upraised.

“Come on, coward,” Morgassa urged. “Be a man. Fight me.”

If she wanted, she could kill him. Instead, she was stalling.

Cole ran around her and continued along the pass.

“Don't turn your back on me!” Morgassa shrieked.

“Haven't you hurt me enough?” Cole cried out. “Go bother somebody else.”

Morgassa flew in front of him, suddenly clad in a full suit of white armor, embellished with gold accents. She grew larger.

Cole wasn't worried anymore. If she was the real deal, she would have already hacked him into lunchmeat. He ran around her again.

There came more rumbling from up ahead, and Carnag stomped into view. The creature looked just how Cole remembered her, the enormous body composed of

wreckage and cages.

Cole wasn't intimidated. If Morgassa was a vision, so was Carnag. He kept running, dodging around the legs.

Carnag and Morgassa dropped out of sight behind him. Cole wondered if the test was over. He ran in silence for about a minute.

Then Stafford Pemberton, High King of the Outskirts, strode into view. Cole had met the High King in Junction. He looked exactly as Cole remembered.

"Cole, you lied to me," Stafford said. "When you played errand boy in my chambers, you were working for my wife. You were hiding my daughter. You are guilty of treason."

"You're guilty of not being real," Cole said, not slowing down.

"I'm plenty real, Cole," the king said, producing a knife. His face reddened as he spoke. "Real enough to punish a traitor! Real enough to take my revenge!"

Cole knew Stafford had to be fake but disliked how authentic he seemed. The unstable look in his eyes. The spit flying from his lips.

Stafford began to cough uncontrollably. He staggered toward Cole, swinging his dagger haphazardly.

Cole raced around him, but Stafford stayed with him, running beside him. The king kept swinging his knife, but never close enough to actually make contact.

"You imagine I'm past my prime?" Stafford gasped, still coughing. "You fancy you can outrun me? You're all going to pay. Wait until I get your friends Dalton and Jenna. Wait until I get Jace and Twitch. Hunter. Mira. They'll suffer for what they did to me. You all will!"

Cole felt tempted to argue. But it was pointless. This was some vision. It would be like talking back to a movie screen.

Stafford coughed violently but kept running. "My daughters will feel my wrath. My wife too. You'll see. I'll make them suffer."

"Enough," spoke a voice from farther up the pass.

Cole had been watching Stafford, so he hadn't seen the new person come into view. He stood in the middle of the pass, hands behind his back. They had only met briefly when Cole first touched the Founding Stone, but Cole would recognize him anywhere. Nazeem.

Standing straight, Nazeem casually waved an arm. Stafford burst into flames. Cole felt a rush of heat from the nearby fire. The High King fell to the ground screaming.

Cole ignored the spectacle.

"You can't win, you know," Nazeem said matter-of-factly.

Cole didn't answer. He just kept running. He couldn't wait until all this was behind him. Fake or not, it was traumatizing.

"You think I'm not real," Nazeem said as Cole neared him. "But what if I'm the one who controls the Pass of Visions? What if I have controlled this place for years, from my prison in the Fallen Temple, like how Trillian exerts influence over the Red Road."

Cole offered no reply. He kept running. Nazeem was getting close.

"What if I'm toying with you? What if this is really me?" He got down on his knees. "Torivors like sport, Cole. We enjoy contests." He pulled open his shirt, displaying his bare chest. "What if I give you a free shot with that sword? What if this is the one such offer I'm ever going to make? What if I find it amusing that you'll pass me by when you had your one chance to strike me down?"

"You're lying," Cole said. After the words left his mouth, he was mad at himself for responding.

"Torivors can't lie," Nazeem said. "I swear this is the real me. And I promise I will not defend myself. It's inexpressibly entertaining that you could end this right now, save all the people you love. I'll let you. I give my word. But you won't. You'll run right by me."

"Yep," Cole said as he ran past him. "Torivors can't lie. But you're not really a torivor. You're just another vision."

"Think what you like," Nazeem said from behind him. "You are running away from the best chance you'll ever have to win this war."

Cole didn't reply. There was no point.

The pass now sloped down instead of up. Cole hoped that meant he had crossed the halfway point.

As he came around a bend, Cole heard a voice weakly call his name.

Turning, Cole saw Winston crawling along the ground, his clothes tattered. "I can't believe I found you," Winston said with a beleaguered smile. "I was trying to catch up. It's not fair for you to face all this alone."

Cole slowed. "This is so mean," he murmured. Winston looked and sounded so real.

"I'm out of strength, Cole," Winston said. "Can you bring the beacon closer? I'm so tired. I feel like I can't go on much longer. The homesong has a hold on me. I feel like I'm slipping. I only made it this far out of devotion."

Cole stopped. He knew he shouldn't, but it was nice to see Winston, even if it was fake. "You're dead, Winston. You already went to the Other. I'm so sorry I couldn't



help you.”

Winston looked a little panicked. “Cole, no! I started to go. It almost had me. But I came back. The shapecrafters had left me for dead, so I followed you, and I finally found you, but I’m so tired now. Could you help me up?” He extended a hand. “I want to come with you. You shouldn’t have to shoulder this burden alone. I want to help.”

“The shapecrafters already took your dead echo,” Cole said.

“No, it’s him Cole,” a voice said from behind him.

Cole turned to find Harvan standing there.

“We gave the shapecrafters the slip,” Harvan said. “We followed you. But Winston is really tired, and I don’t have the strength to help him anymore. Could you lend him a hand?”

“This is sadistic,” Cole muttered, and started running again.

“Come back!” Winston called.

“Let him go,” Harvan said. “He abandoned us once. Of course he’s leaving us again. That kid only cares about himself.”

“Nazeem is back at the top of the pass,” Cole called over his shoulder. “He’s offering free chances to stab him. You guys should take him up on the offer.”

“We’ll do that!” Harvan called. “Save yourself, Cole. It’s what you’re best at.”

Cole kept running. How much longer was this pass going to last?

Around the next bend, Cole found his dad, mom, and sister all tied to chairs and gagged. They mumbled at him urgently, but he couldn’t understand them.

It was very tempting to stop and look. It had been so long since he had seen them. He knew no good would come of it, but it was hard to resist.

They groaned and grunted more urgently as Cole ran by. Was the trick to make him touch them by taking off the gags?

“I may be gullible,” Cole murmured, “but even I have limits.”

After he dashed by them, his dad called out in a clear voice, “Son! Please help us! We don’t know how we got here!”

“How’d you get the gag off, Dad?” Cole yelled over his shoulder.

“I shook my head and it fell free,” his father replied. “Please, Cole!”

“I miss you guys,” Cole called, hardly able to get the words out because of the lump in his throat. Even though it was a trick. Even though they were obviously fake.

Coming around another bend, Cole could see ahead to where the pass ended. And a body lay off to the side, not far from the end of the pass. As he came closer, he saw that it was Destiny.

Of course it was. Destiny Pemberton, sprawled out in this pass full of weird visions.

She didn't move.

Cole couldn't resist. He slowed down to take a closer look.

Tessa was breathing. But her eyes stayed closed.

Cole stopped. "I'm not going to shake you awake," he told her.

She made no reply.

Cole suppressed a laugh. What if this really was her? Wouldn't it be a perfect hiding place? Everybody assuming she was a vision?

Still, no way was it really her.

He started running again.

"Help me," her voice said weakly.

"Now you wake up?" Cole called over his shoulder.

"I need a hero," she said.

"You need acting lessons," Cole replied. "You were a lot more convincing when you were unconscious."

"Please stop saying mean things," Destiny said. Desperation crept into her voice. "Come back! Help me! I'm scared!"

Cole gave no reply. Instead, he continued out of the pass.

## CHAPTER

# 29

## WARDEN

Short grass and sporadic bushes awaited at the far side of the cliffs. As he sprinted across the springy turf, Cole tried to shake off the memories of Morgassa's fingernails digging into his sides as she mangled his shaping power. He tried not to dwell on how much more powerful and dangerous Nazeem would be than his underlings and their creations. He did his best to push aside his guilt over leaving Winston and Harvan behind, and for leading Mira into a trap. He pretended with all his might not to miss his home and family.

Everything in the Pass of Visions had been fake. And everything had forced him to confront real fears and worries and pain.

Cole couldn't help feeling raw. He kept running. His echo body still functioned like normal. But inside he was wounded.

As Cole advanced, off to one side he noticed a wide channel. A narrow channel appeared on the other side. The two slipstreams flowed toward each other, apparently on a course to converge. The Weaver's Beacon seemed to be tugging him toward the place where the channels joined. Cole figured that must be where they had built the bridge.

The music of the cliffs receded behind him, and Cole began to hear the homesong again, along with the whistling music of the slipstreams. Directly ahead a grove came into view, graceful trees with silver bark and crimson leaves. Clover carpeted the ground instead of grass. The grove seemed to mark the place where the slipstreams converged.

When Cole entered the grove, all outside music stopped, replaced by low, peaceful strains. It surprised Cole that such a small grove with such gentle music could overpower all other sounds. As he proceeded among the trees, he still couldn't see or hear a bridge.

But he did encounter a house—a simple structure made of mud bricks with flowers growing on the roof. Two benches sat out in front. A man sat on one of the benches. He stood as Cole approached.

Cole recognized him.

“Dandalus?” Cole asked.

“Yes, my boy,” Dandalus said. “Have we met?”

“I touched the Founding Stone,” Cole said. “I spoke to the imprint you left there.”

“Perhaps you did,” Dandalus said, sitting down again. “What brings you so far into the fringe? It’s much more humane to just leap into a channel.”

“Sometimes that doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” Cole said. The beacon was pointing straight at Dandalus. “I’m looking for the Warden of the Light.”

“You have quite a light of your own,” Dandalus said. “Did you rob the Grand Shaper?”

“She gave it to me,” Cole said. “Then She Who Stands at the Summit sent me to you.”

“You think I’m the Warden of the Light?” Dandalus asked.

Cole started walking sideways. The lantern kept shifting to point right at Dandalus. “The Weaver’s Beacon seems to think so.”

“If we can’t trust a stranger’s lantern, what can we trust?” Dandalus asked, a sparkle in his eye.

“Can you read my mind?” Cole asked. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“I’ve gathered the basics,” Dandalus said. “I’m not as quick at raiding memories as our friend on the mountaintop. It would speed this up and make it simpler if you give me permission to know what you know.”

“Sure,” Cole said.

Dandalus stared at him for a long moment, then gave a nod. “Thank you. I think we can keep the test straightforward. She already tested you, and the Pass of Visions was wrenching.”

“Yeah,” Cole said, barely keeping his voice steady.

“Without knowing the secret of the pass, it’s almost impossible to make it through. I know of nobody who has done it. Even knowing how to survive it, many fail. That’s part of the reason I chose this spot as my sanctuary.”

“Can you only get here through the pass?” Cole asked.

“The two channels run at either side of the towering cliffs,” Dandalus explained. “They have no bridges between here and there. I’m protected by a triangle—two slipstreams and a wall of rock with a single way through.”

“I’ll have to go back through the pass to get out?” Cole asked.

“Unless you sprout wings, it’s the only way,” Dandalus said. “But you survived it once, so I expect you can do it again. Now for my test. Cole, I can send you home. Not an illusion. Not temporarily. I framed the Outskirts. I know how it all works. And I can bend the rules to send you back to your house in Mesa, Arizona. Say yes, and I’ll do it. Say no, and we can discuss other matters.”

“Wait,” Cole said. “Can you send me anywhere?”

“I can send you back Outside,” Dandalus said. “I can’t send you elsewhere in the echolands or the Outskirts.”

“Isn’t Arizona farther?” Cole asked.

“This sanctuary effectively cuts me off from the rest of the echolands and the Outskirts,” Dandalus said. “As with She Who Stands at the Summit, it was the price I had to pay to avoid the call of the Other. However, I am not separated from the ways to the Outside. That I can still do from here.”

“What about my friends?” Cole asked. “Could you send Dalton and Jenna home too?”

“They would have to be here. I explained that I am separated from the rest of the echolands and the Outskirts.”

Cole paused to think. Could he go home alone? Could he leave behind Dalton, Jenna, Hunter, and the other kids who were taken from his neighborhood? It would be so nice to be back in his house. The vision at the Farthest Mountain had given him a taste—his own room, his own bed.

He longed to see his parents. Even his sister. He missed living a normal life. He missed school and sports and bikes and breakfast cereal and hot showers. No running for his life. No monsters to fight. Nobody to save.

If he snuck home, who would know? Were there ways he could help there that he couldn’t here? Maybe he could remind all the parents about their missing kids.

But how could he abandon his quest to find Destiny? How could he leave Mira and Honor to fend for themselves against their father and Nazeem? How could he ditch Dalton, Hunter, and Jenna?

Cole folded his arms. Did his presence here really make a difference? What were his chances of surviving the echolands? What were their chances of winning? Supposedly, there was a chance while he remained. But was that really true? How much did he matter?

In many ways, it would be such a relief to quit all this.

“Would my parents remember me?” Cole asked.

“Probably,” Dandalus said. “I can’t guarantee it.”

“But I would be home to stay,” Cole said.

“To stay,” Dandalus agreed.

Cole shook his head. One day he might regret letting this opportunity pass, but he knew his answer. “I can’t go. Too many people are depending on me. Can I take a rain check?”

“If you can ever find me again, sure, the offer would stand,” Dandalus said. “Though finding me is seldom easy. You are a loyal friend, Cole.”

“I guess,” he said. “Now what?”

“You may ask me three questions,” Dandalus said.

Cole figured he should get the big one out of the way. “Where can I find Destiny Pemberton?”

Dandalus smiled. “I know where you can find her. I will tell you before we finish our conversation, but I prefer to wait until the end. Is that all right?”

“Sure,” Cole said, relieved that Dandalus knew the answer.

“Good. What else can I tell you?”

“How can I get home with my friends? Besides bringing all of them to you.”

“Bringing all of them to me would work,” Dandalus said. “I would send them. But there could be another way. Shall I explain?”

“Please,” Cole said.

“Understanding the particulars involves something of a history lesson,” Dandalus said. “Thank you for opening your mind to me. Among other benefits, I know that I can confide in you. Mine has become a lonely existence. I’ve only had one other visitor in the last two hundred years.”

Cole gave a low whistle.

“I spend a lot of time in trances,” Dandalus said. “Not the dangerous kind. The kind you used when running here.”

“Was I in a trance a lot?” Cole asked.

“Is that your third question?”

“No.”

“I’ll answer regardless,” Dandalus said. “You were in a trance a good portion of the way. Mostly harmless trances, until recently. When you get far enough into the fringe, the call becomes almost irresistible. Even sheltered by the beacon, your defenses were starting to break down.”

“The homesong got pretty tempting,” Cole admitted.

“Which is unavoidable,” Dandalus said. “The whole purpose of the echolands is to

prepare individuals to answer that call. Let me take you back to the beginning. Back before the Outskirts existed. Can you guess what was here?"

"I don't know," Cole said. "Outer space?"

"Wrong," Dandalus said. "There was no outer space here. There still isn't, matter of fact. This entire plane of existence was simply the echolands. Nothing more."

"So you were an echo?" Cole asked.

"That's another question," Dandalus said. "It's hard to converse without them. Keep asking and I'll tell you if you stumble onto a topic that requires you to use your third official one. I was and I am an echo. There was originally a single type of shaping here. It was most similar to Sambrian shaping, but you could accomplish all that can be done in any of the five kingdoms. And more."

"Did people shape the echolands a lot?" Cole asked.

"Quite a bit, as you might imagine," Dandalus said. "Not all the echoes were strong shapers. But everyone could at least shape a little. People carved out their own versions of paradise while waiting to heed the call of the Other."

"You came here from another world," Cole said.

"After my physical body died, yes," Dandalus said. "Everyone did. Nobody is native to the echolands. You've heard the Outskirts described as an in-between place? It really is. It's a physical realm built in the afterlife. A place between life and what comes after. A place between reality and imagination, because you can turn just about anything you can imagine into reality. A place between sleep and wakefulness, because if you can't sleep, how can you be sure you're truly awake? The echolands have a transitory, dreamlike quality. This place is intended as a permanent home to none."

"But you changed it," Cole said. "To add the Five Kingdoms."

"Some of us got greedy," Dandalus said. "We didn't mean any harm. But a handful of us were extremely powerful shapers. We learned how to cheat the call of the Other and used the time to grow in power. Eventually, we decided that we wanted to live again. So we used our abilities to create a material world here in the echolands. A mortal world."

"The Outskirts," Cole said.

"It didn't go well at first," Dandalus confessed. "We made a modest realm. We brought in mortals from some of the neighboring worlds. The easiest to access was Earth. But the mortals arrived with much more powerful shaping skills than the typical echo, and they soon destroyed the world we created. Everyone we had brought here died."

"Could you visit the world you made?" Cole asked.

“That was the point,” Dandalus said. “We transformed our echoes so we could dwell there. It made us feel alive again. A detailed simulation of mortality.”

“What did you do when the world was destroyed?” Cole asked.

“We escaped back to the echolands,” Dandalus said. “And we tried again. We made the next world much more sturdy and complete before transplanting actual mortals. Once all was ready, we brought a new group of mortals, and within five years they destroyed the world again.”

“Bummer,” Cole said.

“We felt terrible,” Dandalus said. “Hundreds of lives were lost. We decided that if we were going to make a third attempt, we needed to rethink everything.”

“What did you do?”

“We labored to restructure the shaping power itself,” Dandalus said. “Shaping had been the main problem. Mortals would come to the world we had made and destroy all we had created. So we toiled until we learned to use shaping to redesign how shaping itself functioned.”

“That sounds like shapecraft,” Cole said.

“Doesn’t it?”

“You’re hurting my brain.”

“It hurt ours, too. But eventually we succeeded. Once we were finished, very few echoes besides ourselves could shape in the echolands. Those who could had limited abilities.”

“And you divided the new world into five kingdoms.”

“Yes!” Dandalus said. “You’re catching on! We only allowed certain shaping abilities in the various kingdoms. We wanted mortals to be able to shape, but not enough to destroy what we had created. The shaping in Sambria is called shaping because it is the closest to the original shaping. Just not quite as powerful. There was also enchanting, tinkering, weaving, and minding. When we brought mortals in the next time, the experiment worked. The world held together. We had produced the five kingdoms of the Outskirts.”

“And you guys were the first Grand Shapers,” Cole guessed.

“There were six of us,” Dandalus said. “I was the first High Shaper. The other five each supervised one of the kingdoms. Over time, a new threat developed.”

“The torivors?” Cole guessed.

“They came later. The first threat was from the echoes. Too many of them wanted to migrate from the echolands to the Outskirts. There were unfair advantages to living as an echo in the mortal world, and many echoes abused their power. Though the six



of us did our best to protect the mortals, other echoes commenced to exploit and enslave them. Some mortals died on purpose so they could return as echoes. It was becoming a mess.”

“How did you handle it?” Cole wondered.

“Can’t you guess?” Dandalus asked. “We stepped away from our creation. Together, we reshaped the world so that echoes couldn’t dwell in the mortal Outskirts. The six of us withdrew and left mortal Grand Shapers in our place. There are still some places where echoes can sneak back into mortality, but not many, and not without incurring mortal weaknesses.”

“What about the Shiver Moon?” Cole asked.

“We didn’t want to completely sever ties between the echolands and the mortal kingdoms. The weavers of Necronum became the bridge. The Shiver Moon allowed for easier communication for all on certain nights in Necronum.”

“When did the torivors come?” Cole asked.

“Right before we divided the echolands from the Outskirts,” Dandalus said. “The six of us slipped back across and captured them. Barely. It took all our ingenuity.”

“So if you split up the shaping powers, how does shapecraft fit in?” Cole asked.

“Shapecraft taps into the original shaping of the echolands,” Dandalus said. “Raw shaping. Natural shaping. The torivors have figured out ways to work around the system we established. They can sidestep many of the rules we made. If they succeed in truly unleashing raw shaping, mortal shapers will once again tear apart the world we built. Except this time, millions will perish.”

“Wow,” Cole said.

“And the torivors will take control of the echolands,” Dandalus said. “The five kingdoms will be destroyed, and whatever remains will be ruled by an all-powerful tyrant.”

“I see why you don’t want Nazeem to get free,” Cole said.

“Perhaps you are wondering what all this has to do with your question.”

“About getting home?”

“Right. Your problem involves the fundamental nature of this world. This was originally a place for the echoes of deceased mortals to let go of their previous lives. The Outskirts was created within the echolands. Those underlying mechanisms remain in place, but in some ways they work more powerfully on mortals who come here from Outside. When a lifeforce moves to the echolands, it is never meant to return. When a mortal comes to the Outskirts, some of the same rules take hold. Even if you manage to get home, you are drawn back.”

“That makes a weird kind of sense,” Cole said.

“When a lifeforce comes here as an echo, the echolands not only help the deceased individual prepare to move on—the preliminary separation helps those who mourn let go of the deceased. When a mortal comes to the Outskirts, the condition is exaggerated, and those who most love the person forget all about him.”

“The echolands are about letting go and moving on,” Cole said. “The Outskirts share some of those traits.”

“It would require shaping at the most fundamental level to overcome these obstacles,” Dandalus said. “Raw shaping of the primary aspects of this reality. It’s impossible to do within the system we designed. But you have the potential of adjusting the system itself.”

“Me?” Cole asked.

“It’s why Morgassa attacked you so fiercely,” Dandalus said. “Your power was a threat. You naturally possess what the shapecrafters have artificially tried to create inside of themselves—raw shaping power. That’s why you could make the Jumping Sword work in Elloweer. Your power transcends the boundaries we established. It took you a long time to start using it because your ability was not meant to function in the system we created. But that didn’t stop you.”

“Doesn’t that make me dangerous?” Cole asked.

“Yes. It also makes you useful. Because your style of shaping could actually challenge the torivors. I’m not sure anyone else could make them break a sweat. This must be why Trillian thought you might be able to save the Outskirts.”

“Wouldn’t Trillian hate me?” Cole asked.

“Hard to say,” Dandalus said. “I expect he sees you as both a hazard and an opportunity. He probably hopes you will go to him for training. Given your innate abilities, who knows how he might try to use you?”

Cole shivered. “I don’t want to serve the torivors. But I’ll try to stop them if I can.”

“I know you mean well. I admire your courage. Cole, the answer to your question is that you have the potential to get your friends home if you can unlock your power.”

“Do you know how I can do that?”

“That is a big question. Want to make it number three?”

“Yes.”

“I know you wish that I could repair your power,” Dandalus said. “I wish it too. But I can’t. The damage is too wrapped up in who you are. It connects to your very lifespark. If I tried to heal it, I would kill you.”

“Trillian thought I could get my power back,” Cole said.

“Trillian was probably right,” Dandalus said. “But you will have to find a way. I don’t know of anyone who can do it for you.”

“When I touched the Founding Stone, your imprint helped me use my power,” Cole said.

“I saw that episode in your memories. My imprint didn’t heal your damage. It helped you work around it. I could do the same here. I could help you work around your damage and engage some of your power. But when you left, you would remain as you were. Perhaps, given enough time, you will find methods to work around the damage on your own.”

“So you can’t help me fix the problem,” Cole said. “I wasted my last question.”

Dandalus looked beyond Cole. “I don’t see a line of people awaiting their turn. The three-question rule is there to help prevent frivolous inquiries and to let me see what most matters to people. You can ask me more if you’d like.”

“You seem to know a lot,” Cole said.

“I am the Warden of the Light.”

“Where is the light?” Cole asked. “Is it bright?”

“Brightness isn’t always the best for seeing,” Dandalus said. “It depends on the goal. For example, back home in Arizona, when could you see farthest?”

“What do you mean?” Cole said. “Like during the day? Or when I was on a mountain?”

“You could see your surroundings best during the day,” Dandalus said. “But when could you see farthest?”

“At night,” Cole realized. “The stars. Those are easily the farthest things I could see.”

“But they were invisible during the day,” Dandalus said. “Brightness can help, but it isn’t everything.”

“Is your light a lantern like this one?” Cole asked, holding up the beacon.

“It is a more important kind of light,” Dandalus said. “The light of understanding. The light of discernment. The light that lets us comprehend things as they really are.”

“Do you know everything?”

“I’m as close as it comes in this plane of existence. I know what the echolands once were. I know how we changed them. If all else fails, I can restore them.” He considered Cole with grave eyes.

“You mean erase what you did?” Cole asked. “Hit the self-destruct button?”

“More or less,” Dandalus said. “If it comes to it, I could destroy the Outskirts, flush

all the echoes to the Other, and restore the echolands to their original state. I can undo what the six of us established.”

“But it would kill everybody,” Cole said.

“Everybody,” Dandalus emphasized. “We’d all head to the Other. Including myself. I hope never to do it. But I am the final safeguard against the echolands being overthrown and corrupted. I am the Warden of the Light.”

“What about my friends?” Cole tried. “Do you know where they are?”

“Like She Who Stands at the Summit, I can’t see into the strongholds tainted by shapecraft. And I can’t see the mortal Outskirts from here. But Prescia, Ferrin, Drake, and Desmond were captured when they tried to free Honor from Gamat Rue. Harvan was taken there as well. Mira and Durny remain at the Fallen Temple.”

“It’s all on me,” Cole said, buckling under the impossible weight of all the people he needed to help.

“Take it one problem at a time,” Dandalus said.

“I guess,” Cole said. “What else should I ask you?”

“I could shed light on many issues that have made you curious. Remember, I’ve seen your mind. For example, I made the cloudwalls in Sambria.”

“You did?”

“I felt bad for those whose wishes never came true. For the unfulfilled dreams here and elsewhere. One cloudwall interprets broken dreams into physical realities. It was quite difficult to construct. My crowning achievement in some ways. It selects those subjects who dreamed biggest but also endured the greatest frustration. Since the cloudwall ran the risk of eventually bringing too much material into the Outskirts, I designed the other one to dispose of the creations. I never anticipated the salvage operations that sprang up, but I’m happy they exist, so the castles provide some benefit to people beyond their aesthetics.”

“I almost died in some of those castles,” Cole said.

“I saw those memories. It’s why I suspected you might be interested.”

“What else can you tell me?” Cole asked.

“Understanding the true nature of the Outskirts resolves some of the questions you have wondered about. Originally, the echoes all communicated by telepathy. It transcended language. We left enough of that in place that everyone understands one another here, no matter what language they speak. In fact, it takes very disparate languages to create the impression of an accent.”

“More,” Cole said. “Read my mind.”

“You’ve wondered about the sky. The Outskirts are not organized as a round

planet like Earth. They are essentially flat, created entirely in the echolands. But the mortals we brought here all came from round worlds, so we wanted to give them days and nights. Vershaw oversaw the skies. He was the most artistic of us. He borrowed vistas from many of the different worlds that feed into the echolands, and added plenty of his own touches. Since the heavens were basically an elaborate simulation, he embraced the ruse, designing them without reliable patterns. It's enough to drive an astronomer mad."

"The sun felt real," Cole said.

"It radiates a similar spectrum as your sun back home," Dandalus said. "And the moons shed real light. But they are not actually true bodies floating in space. We faked it. The skies in the original echolands have always been as you see them here. Every now and then we allowed a duskday in the Outskirts to pay homage to the original sky."

"Cool," Cole said. "Keep going. I want to hear more."

"I could ramble on for much too long," Dandalus said. "Is there anything else specific you wish to know?"

Cole racked his brain for the best question. "What's the meaning of life?"

Dandalus smiled. "You asked Aeronomatron this one. His answer didn't satisfy you?"

"Not really."

Dandalus scrunched his face. "There are different ways to explain it. Here is one. The purpose of existence is the education of the will. And the meaning of life is to learn to love the right things."

"I like that," Cole said. "What are the right things?"

"In short? Those things that bring lasting happiness to yourself and others."

"Can you be more specific?" Cole said.

"The whole point involves discovering what those things are," Dandalus said. "Many lessons must be lived to be understood. You'll find that it doesn't so much matter what happens as you live—what gives it all purpose and meaning is who you become. You're doing a good job, Cole. An outstanding job for one so young. You're heading in the right direction."

"Thanks," Cole said.

"I have enjoyed our conversation," Dandalus said. "I miss interacting with others. Are you ready to learn where you can find Destiny?"

"Yes," Cole said.

Dandalus glanced over his shoulder. "She's in my house." He raised his voice.

“Tessa! We have a visitor.”

Destiny appeared in the doorway. “I was listening.”

## CHAPTER

# 30

## TESSA

Cole could find no words. He finally went with “Hi.”

“Hello,” she replied. “This is the boy you told me about?” she asked Dandalus.

“Yes,” Dandalus said. “He came here to help you.”

Cole just stared. The most powerful people in the world were looking for Destiny. Nobody had a clue where she was hiding. People had sacrificed to find her. The task seemed impossible. Cole had only dared to hope for information that might point him in the right direction.

And here she was. A young girl.

“I met your imprint in the Cave of Memory,” Cole said.

“Was I nice?” Tessa asked.

“I liked you,” Cole said. “I’ve been helping your sister Mira.”

Tessa brightened at the mention of her sister. “How is she?”

“Well, she got captured,” Cole said. “Honor too. Mira gave me the mission to find you.”

“Cole rode the Mare,” Dandalus said. “It saved him twice. I believe your power wanted him to locate you.”

“The Mare brought me here,” Tessa said.

“My only other visitor in the past two hundred years,” Dandalus said.

“Your own power brought you here?” Cole asked.

“I can’t control her,” Tessa said. “I didn’t know where we were going.”

“Would have been nice if the Mare had brought me here too,” Cole said.

“The Mare helped you,” Dandalus said. “Thanks to the Mare you met Durny and Harvan. Be grateful for that much. Destiny’s power is hard to understand.”

“I’ve started to get flashes of knowledge again,” Destiny said. “At first it was a relief to lose my power. Seeing too much took away a lot of my choices. It also made people hate me. But sometimes it’s nice to know what to do. To feel certain.”

“Do you know what her power is doing now?” Cole asked Dandalus.

“I can’t see the Mare,” Dandalus said. “I don’t think anybody can perceive Destiny’s power from a distance. It’s why nobody knows Destiny came here.”

“You knew the Mare helped me,” Cole said.

“Only thanks to your memories,” Dandalus explained.

“Right,” Cole said. He scowled. “I’ve searched for Tessa for a long time. But if nobody knows that she’s here, shouldn’t I leave her be? Where am I going to take her that’s safer than this place?”

“I’m supposed to leave,” Tessa said. “I’ve felt that much.”

“The Mare put you on a path to find Tessa,” Dandalus said. “Where were you planning to take her?”

“At first I wanted to reunite her with Mira,” Cole said. “Now that Mira is captured, I guess I would take Tessa back to her physical body, then go after Mira.”

“Sounds sensible,” Dandalus said. “She’ll be more vulnerable than she is here, but I can’t hide her forever. Nazeem is hunting too intently. Eventually, we’ll be found. And that would be unfortunate. I’m not meant to be discovered.”

“But what if Stafford or Nazeem capture Destiny?” Cole asked.

“That risk persists no matter where she goes,” Dandalus said. “The Mare brought Tessa here. And here she has remained until the Mare sent you to fetch her.”

“I really have felt urges to go,” Tessa said.

“I’ve had to restrain her from heading out alone,” Dandalus said.

“I let him restrain me,” Tessa said. “It wasn’t quite time. Now it is.”

Cole sighed. “Okay. I’ll do my best to protect you.”

“The Weaver’s Beacon will help,” Dandalus said. “Your enemies will struggle to find you in the echolands while you possess it.”

“Is there any other place I should go?” Cole asked. “Anything else I should do?”

“Stick to your plan,” Dandalus said. “Hide Tessa, then go after her sisters.”

“What about Nazeem?” Cole asked. “What if he breaks free?”

“I have heard reports that Nazeem expects to win his freedom,” Dandalus said. “I can’t directly interact with the echolands or the Outskirts anymore, but I see and hear plenty in the echolands. We made the Fallen Temple so secure! Powerful or not, I could not imagine how he could defeat our defenses. Until I saw your memories, Cole.”

“What was the clue?” Cole asked.

“Nazeem communicated with his followers in Junction using the Founding Stone,” Dandalus said. “It’s a brilliant loophole that I failed to anticipate. The Founding Stone



is an object of considerable power. It connects to all physical material in the Outskirts. It was designed to be unbreakable, but shapecraft can thwart the most careful designs. My guess is one of Nazeem's disciples used shapecraft to break off a piece of the Founding Stone and brought it to the Fallen Temple."

"That makes sense," Cole said. "Once I shared my power with the Founding Stone, your imprint got rid of Nazeem."

Dandalus nodded. "When my imprint spoke with you, he downplayed the import of the Founding Stone. It's safer not to let people know."

"Can Nazeem use the Founding Stone to get free?" Tessa asked.

"Escape should still be virtually impossible," Dandalus said. "But given the confidence he is showing, Nazeem must have found a way."

"So we need to get the Founding Stone from him," Cole said.

"It might disrupt his chance to escape," Dandalus said.

"I'll tell my friends," Cole said. "We'll figure it out."

"It won't be easy," Dandalus said sadly. "Inside his domain, Nazeem is enormously powerful."

"Mira and Nori are in trouble because they came looking for me," Tessa said. "We have to help them. We should go."

"I need to get her back to the Temple of the Robust Sky," Cole told Dandalus.

"A long journey," Dandalus said. "I can calibrate the Weaver's Beacon to draw you there."

"Please," Cole said, holding out the lantern.

"It is done," Dandalus said, waving it away.

"Thanks," Cole said.

"Once you're gone, I will move on as well," Dandalus said.

"Where?" Cole asked.

"My next hiding place must remain a secret. I have a few other sanctuaries that I can reach without succumbing to the call. People out in the world can't know my location. Should you ever need to find me again, start with She Who Stands at the Summit."

Tessa went and hugged Dandalus. "Thank you," she said. "I'll never forget you."

Dandalus patted her head. "You have a power unlike anything I have beheld in all my days. Why Nazeem would seek to control something so untamable lies beyond my understanding. Perhaps his pride is too great to recognize the danger. But the reality remains that he wants you, Tessa. Take care."

Cole and Tessa walked away from Dandalus and his little house. They passed

through trees to the short grass and occasional bushes of the field beyond. The wall of cliffs rose in the distance.

“I usually run,” Cole said.

“I’d like that,” Tessa said. “I’ve kept still for so long.”

They set off across the grass.

“You really feel like you should leave?” Cole asked.

“Absolutely,” Tessa said with confidence

“How can you tell?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Tessa said. “It’s kind of like a persistent hunch. I know when I feel it.”

“You’re getting more of these feelings again?” Cole asked.

“Not like before,” Tessa said. “It used to happen many times a day. After Papa took my power it seemed like that type of knowing had ended. But it has started up again.”

They ran in silence. The wall of cliffs drew nearer.

“Do you know about the Pass of Visions?” Cole asked.

“Dandalus explained not to touch anybody,” Tessa said. “I came through on Thunder last time.”

“You call the horse Thunder?” Cole asked, surprised.

“That’s her name,” Tessa said.

“I call her Thunder too.”

“You probably felt it in her music.”

“The pass can be bad,” Cole said. “You’ll see things you really fear, and people you really love. It’s all phony. I even saw you.”

“Really?”

“You looked just like your imprint. You wanted my help.”

“It definitely wasn’t me.” Her head tipped upward. “What’s that?”

Cole looked up. A bunch of winged specks were soaring toward them out of the sky.

He came to a halt. A perplexing sense of unreality washed over him. This had already happened! This was how he had lost Harvan and Winston. It couldn’t be happening again. Here? Now?

“No way,” he murmured.

“What?”

Cole shook his head. “This is how Sando attacked us at the Farthest Mountain. There are more of them this time.” He counted eleven people.

“What should we do?”

Cole looked back. The trees that sheltered Dandalus were about as far away as the cliffs. Was there any chance of making it? They had to try. "We're in serious trouble," Cole said, drawing the Jumping Sword. "Run!"

They sprinted together back toward the trees. Cole kept glancing over his shoulder, watching as the winged men swooped closer. Five glided beyond them, landing in positions that blocked retreat to Dandalus. The other six came up short, blocking access to the pass.

Sure enough, Sando stood among the six. He shrugged out of his glider and raised both hands. "A word, young sir! Do not run and we will not pursue. Allow us a moment of your time?"

Cole faced him. Destiny stood beside him. There was no place to run.

"What are you doing here?" Cole asked.

"Same as you," Sando said. "Looking for Destiny. Hello, Tessa."

She said nothing.

Cole scowled. "How did you find me?"

Sando chuckled softly. "I'm not new at this. I have my methods."

"Can you follow the beacon?" Cole asked.

"The beacon cannot be traced," Sando said. "Should I tell you, giver of silver? Why not? Consider it my offering to you. A debt repaid. I gave Desmond a message from Honor to Destiny. It was a real message that I offered to deliver for Honor after we captured her. I told Desmond that if he gave the message to you, Cole, I would keep Honor out of the Fallen Temple. She would go to Gamat Rue instead, where he might have a chance to rescue her. Desmond suspected I had ulterior motives, of course, but risked the small favor to protect his princess."

"The message let you follow me," Cole said.

"Message?" Tessa asked.

"I forgot to give it to you," Cole said. "I was excited to find you. I have it. I would have remembered."

"You have not delivered it yet?" Sando scolded, wagging a finger. "Naughty errand boy!"

"You knew we would go to Deepwell?" Cole asked.

"I believed so, yes," Sando said. "You came across at the Temple of the Robust Sky. I expected you would have the same information as Honor, and that is where she went. I am one of Nazeem's chief officers. I ordered the guards at Deepwell to offer minimum resistance. I wanted you to free Desmond, so he would give you the message. The Mare rescued you twice, Cole. I believed you would lead me to

Destiny. Congratulations, young sir. You have now delivered to me not one, but two princesses! Perhaps *you* should be a chief officer for Nazeem!”

“I’m so sorry,” Cole groaned. His gut twisted with shame and frustration. Sando was right.

“I felt it was time to leave,” Tessa said, sounding puzzled. “Maybe it was to protect Dandalus.”

“Let’s keep this simple,” Sando said. “Come with us.”

Cole looked and listened. Now would be a really good time for the Mare to return. The horse had bailed him out when he was cornered before. Now he was with Destiny! It was like a hundred times more important!

But he heard no whinny, no hoofbeats, no thrilling music.

Without warning, Tessa started running. Not toward Dandalus. Not toward the cliffs. She took off toward the nearer of the two channels. The narrower one.

Cole followed her. Was she hoping to get around the shapecrafters and make it back to Dandalus? The shapecrafters blocking the way ran with them. Tessa would have to sprint quite a bit faster than the shapecrafters to get around them. But the opposite was happening. The fastest shapecrafters were pulling ahead of them.

“Don’t flee,” Sando called, running as well. “Why waste the effort? We have you. This is over. Why draw it out?”

“You want to make it to Dandalus?” Cole asked Tessa.

“If we can,” she said. “Maybe you can use that sword?”

Cole liked the idea. If he attacked violently enough, maybe he could do for Tessa what Harvan had done for him. Maybe he could buy her time to make it back to Dandalus. Once she was inside his sanctuary, he should be able to protect her. Maybe they could flee together to one of his other hiding places.

Still running toward the channel, Cole veered toward the shapecrafters who were blocking the way to Dandalus. They veered toward him as well.

“I’ll slow them down,” Cole told Tessa quietly. “You run through the opening.”

The channel was getting closer. They were running out of room. He needed to engage the shapecrafters before he and Tessa ended up pinned against the slipstream.

Mustering all his fear and desperation, Cole pointed the Jumping Sword at the nearest shapecrafter. “Away!” he shouted. The sword failed to pull him.

Instead of jumping, Cole charged the nearest shapecrafter and whacked him on the chest. The blade didn’t cut deeply, but the man stumbled, and so Cole swung at the next closest shapecrafter, who slowed to avoid the blow.

“No, no, no!” Sando shouted. “The girl! Stop the girl!”

Cole looked back at Destiny and realized what was happening. She hadn't followed Cole's lead. She wasn't trying to dash through the gap he created. She was almost to the slipstream, running hard, showing no sign of slowing or turning.

"Tessa, no!" Cole yelled. This was all wrong! This wasn't how it was supposed to happen!

Cole raced after her. The shapecrafters did too. But they had concentrated on keeping her from getting around them. They had meant to corral her. They had driven her toward the slipstream to pin her against a dead end.

Except she was going to use it as an exit.

Cole hoped she might be bluffing. Maybe Tessa would try to use the threat of jumping in to get Sando to back down.

Nobody was going to arrive in time to stop her.

Her death would also destroy her power. Thunder was about to stop existing. Perhaps violently.

"Stop her!" Sando screamed.

Two of the shapecrafters had slowed to chant and gesture. They were trying to freeze her.

Tessa never slowed.

"Tell my sisters I love them!" she shouted as she sprang into the slipstream.

## CHAPTER

# 31

## POWER

No!” Cole bellowed.

This was not happening.

His job was to find Destiny. It was what Mira had most wanted. It was vital to the rebellion.

Tessa was in the slipstream. He hadn’t anticipated her taking such drastic action to avoid capture. He had failed. It was over.

Her little body flowed along in the ether, arms flailing.

And Cole knew what he had to do.

He had no choice.

Impossible or not, he had to save her.

No matter the price.

Sheathing his sword, Cole ran with all his strength. He might be able to reach Tessa before the slipstream swept her out of range. Her body wasn’t traveling as fast as the whistling ether.

But she was going faster than he could run.

By the time Cole reached the edge of the channel, Tessa had swept by him. As he tried to follow, her lead kept stretching.

There was only one possible way to catch up.

Cole considered keeping the lantern, then shuttered and dropped it. Maybe Dandalus could protect it from Sando. If not, at least the Weaver’s Beacon would have a better chance of survival than it would in the channel.

Cole jumped in.

The shrill whistling of the slipstream gained the overwhelming fury of a hurricane. Beneath it, behind it, the gorgeous call of the Other sang of home. The mix was exhilarating and peaceful. He felt a tremendous urge to close his eyes and zoom to the source of that beautiful music.

Not yet. Maybe later.

He had somebody to rescue first.

Swimming forward, Cole caught sight of Tessa up ahead. As he stroked downstream, she resisted the current. Their combined efforts allowed him to gain on her.

“Tessa!” he shouted, the word lost in the howling symphony of the slipstream.

Head bobbing above and below the surface, Cole struggled to keep her in view. The slipstream blurred all around him, a streaky gale of fog and tinsel. It was hard to tell if he was floating or flying—the ether had more substance than wind but less than water. He refused to inhale the substance, grateful that breathing wasn’t necessary in the echolands.

Tessa drew near. Heaving himself forward, Cole wrapped his arms around her. They both sank. His feet began clipping the rocky floor of the channel. With their combined weight, he couldn’t get his head back above the surface. His feet kept striking the channel floor. Gritting his teeth, Cole absorbed several impacts until he slowed enough to plant his feet against some firm rocks.

Tessa clung to him. He held her close and leaned against the wailing might of the slipstream. It took all his strength to hold steady. He could feel that if he lifted a leg to take a step, he would be washed downstream.

Squinting against the fury of the slipstream, frantic music shrilling in his ears, Cole tried to get his bearings. The near side of the channel was a sheer wall. There would be no wading out. It would require a climb.

Looking up, he found that the slipstream wasn’t horribly deep where he stood. If he raised his hands over his head, his fingers would break the shimmering surface.

“Let me go!” Tessa cried, her words barely audible. “I’m not afraid!”

“I have to save you!” Cole yelled back.

“It’s too late!” Tessa shouted. “Nobody returns from the slipstreams.”

Cole saw a shape leaning out over the surface of the slipstream. Distorted as it was by the rushing ether, it took Cole a moment to recognize the form as Sando. His shapecrafters were holding one arm so he could lean out over the ether, his free hand outstretched toward the surface.

Cole felt a thrill of excitement. If he could lift Tessa high enough, Sando would be able to pull her out. Maybe she could still survive this!

When Cole tried to speak again, he found he had used up all his breath on his previous shouts. He didn’t need to breathe to live, but air was still necessary to push

words out. Ducking his chin, Cole inhaled through his nose and discovered the ether was breathable. Inside his nostrils, it felt much more like air than water.

“You have to live!” Cole hollered, unsure whether she could hear him.

“They’ll use my power!” Tessa replied, her words barely audible. “I don’t want more people to get hurt!”

“Dandalus doesn’t think anyone can use your power!” Cole yelled. “And I agree! I saw Thunder. I’m handing you up!”

“Let’s float away!” Tessa called out. “All this will be over!”

“No!” Cole insisted.

“It felt right to jump in here!” Tessa cried.

“It felt right to save you!” Cole replied.

“That doesn’t mean . . . ,” Tessa started. The slipstream shrilled in his ears throughout her pause. “Well, maybe.”

“Someone can still save you!” Cole called, happy to hear her wavering.

“He’ll take me to Nazeem!”

“Get away! Be strong! Make their plans backfire! Get rescued!”

“All right!” Destiny relented.

“Let go of me!” Cole yelled.

She released her hold, and Cole heaved her upward. Sando leaned farther forward, Tessa’s arms broke the surface of the slipstream, and suddenly, she was pulled up and away. In a blink, Sando and Tessa were no longer in view. Only the whooshing ether remained.

Without Tessa weighing him down, Cole immediately felt more buoyant. The slipstream tore at him, threatening to carry him away. He hooked one foot beneath a large rock on the floor of the channel, leaned into the current more, and struggled to think heavy, immovable thoughts.

A blizzard of ether lashed at him relentlessly, howling around him, interlaced with the heart-melting melody of the homesong. If he tried to take a step, he would be swept away. He could barely maintain his present position. If the current surged just a little stronger, he would be washed away.

Might somebody throw him a rope? Lower a branch? Extend a wing?

He kept glancing at the jittery surface, but no saviors appeared.

It was just him and the slipstream.

Maybe he should let the current take him. At this point, wasn’t he resisting the inevitable? Wasn’t it just a matter of time?

But somebody had to save Tessa. And so many others. He had to hold on.



There seemed to be power in his defiance. He felt a little more firmly anchored to the channel floor.

He had to think. Maybe there was a way out of this. He wasn't going to suffocate. He wasn't going to get tired. He might be able to stay put for a good while. If he lasted long enough, maybe somebody would help him.

He needed to live. He had to see his family again. He had to help Dalton and Jenna find their way home.

As Cole embraced those thoughts, once again he felt a little more firmly planted against the turbulence. The sensation of the ether was changing. The windy fluid still mostly whooshed around him, but now it felt like some of it flowed through him. As he paid attention to the sensation, it gradually increased.

Was the slipstream really penetrating him? It made him feel intangible, like a ghost. Like his very substance was diminishing.

The call of the Other rang more clearly than earlier. In fact, as the ether passed through him, he could almost feel the homesong inside of him. When he focused on the call, a greater portion of the slipstream slid right through him. Having the ether stream through him reduced the drag, making him feel a little more stable. But it also felt like he was disappearing. Was he being washed away one particle at a time? How long before nothing was left?

"No!" he cried, his voice small against the banshee chorus. A memory stirred. When had he heard wind like this? The terminal void behind the cloudwall! He wondered if the swirling maelstrom might be composed of this same ether.

He hunkered a bit lower and leaned into the current a bit more. The slipstream hardly seemed to flow around him anymore. Yet the current still threatened to carry him away. The pull was reduced, but not as much as it should have been if he completely lacked substance.

Cole began to feel hot inside. Although the ether penetrated his body, something within him resisted the shrieking gale, causing incredible friction. The heat became uncomfortable before Cole recognized the scalding element as his power.

He was feeling his power! It had been so long! He had barely learned to recognize it before it was blocked. He had never gotten to enjoy it. And he couldn't enjoy it now as it continued to burn hotter.

What was going on? Would he burst into flames?

His entire body began to vibrate. The friction against his power was becoming more powerful than the pull against his body. Would his soul get ripped out? His lifspark? Was this how that felt?

Cole gritted his teeth. He wouldn't let the slipstream take him. Since he could feel his power, Cole reached for it. The effort caused physical pain. It was scorching, white hot, unfit to be used.

And then he could no longer hear the song of the slipstream. It was replaced by the homesong in a fullness he had never experienced. The current kept pulling but seemed remote. More important was the heavenly music washing over him. The peace coursing through him. The sublime assurances.

Somewhere deep inside he knew and loved the homesong. He adored it completely and instinctively. Was this how an orphan might feel, reunited with his mother, her beloved voice and smell reviving dormant memories? Cole had lost everything—his home, his family, his friends, his future—but this song promised restoration. Peace and joy and an endless abundance that included all he believed he had lost.

This song had been sacred to Cole since before he was born. His life had been an illusion. This music was home.

And the music was only a promise! What would it be like to actually go there? Why was he resisting? Why wasn't he rushing toward this greatest of all destinations?

The searing heat of his power blazed inside of him. Noticing it helped the homesong recede slightly. Was his power charring him from the inside? Was he turning to ashes? Maybe that was why the slipstream gushed through him, as if he were a hologram.

The homesong resurged, more hopeful and joyous than he could absorb. Why not embrace it? Why not get lost in it?

Tessa.

Mira.

Dalton.

Jace.

Jenna.

Hunter.

People needed him.

The call of the Other decreased in volume. He could hear the slipstream again. It physically tugged at him a bit more.

Sando had taken Tessa. Mira was imprisoned at the Fallen Temple. Jace and Joe were at Gamat Rue. And it was all his fault.

The slipstream was going through him less, flowing around him more. His power was cooling, the friction decreasing.

Dalton was counting on him to return. He had promised to find Jenna. Somebody had to stop Stafford Pemberton and Nazeem. He needed to get home to his family and to help the other kids from his neighborhood do the same.

The homesong would have to wait.

The slipstream howled around him, tearing at him, but no longer sifting through him. The call of the Other remained present but not overpowering.

People needed him. They needed his help. They needed his power.

His power.

He felt it clearly. Not hot anymore. Not catching against the slipstream.

Not gone.

His power was there more clearly than he had ever felt it, even when he had used it in the fight against Morgassa, even when the Founding Stone had helped it awaken. After all this time, it was back.

And he was stuck at the bottom of a channel, on the fringe of the echolands, the fury of the slipstream threatening to peel him from his position at any moment. Cole could envision himself hurtling along the channel, a rag doll in a tornado.

But his power was back.

The glow of it gave him confidence.

And now he knew what to do.

Cole drew the Jumping Sword and pushed some of his power into it. Flames danced along the blade, bright even in the frantic blur of the ether.

He pointed the blade at the surface of the slipstream, angling it toward the near shore of the channel.

“Away!” he shouted.

And away he flew.

## CHAPTER

# 32

## THUNDER

Cole erupted from the slipstream, soaring up over the field beside the channel. The Jumping Sword always knew where he was pointing, but in his excitement, Cole had aimed too high. He rose about thirty feet over the field, then slowed at the apex of his flight before plummeting down.

Fortunately, Cole was no rookie with the Jumping Sword. As he landed, he pointed to a spot up ahead, shouted the command word, and greatly reduced the impact by taking a second smaller jump.

After coming to a stop, Cole looked around, his sword ready. He could still distinctly feel his power, and he knew that with the Jumping Sword he could give Sando a much better fight.

But Cole saw no sign of Sando, Tessa, or the other shapecrafters, not even as specks in the sky. How long had he been stuck in the slipstream?

Cole sheathed the Jumping Sword. At least he was alive. He had never been so relieved to feel the ground beneath his feet or to see the sky overhead. He had almost left this world behind.

While Cole had chased Tessa inside the channel, the ether had carried him almost back to the wooded sanctuary where Dandalus lived. Though he felt embarrassed about losing Tessa so quickly, Cole figured he should check with Dandalus before going after her.

After his first step back toward Dandalus, Cole heard a distant whinny, accompanied by faint, thrilling music. He stopped, then turned.

In the distance, Thunder raced toward him from the direction of the cliffs. Cole gritted his teeth. Why couldn't the Mare have appeared earlier? He and Tessa might have outrun Sando.

Of course, he could still use a ride.

"Cole!" called a voice from behind.

Cole turned to find Dandalus approaching through the trees. A radiant cloud swirled inside the Warden of the Light, somehow perceivable through his clothes and skin. Cole knew from his experience at the Founding Stone that the glimmer was Dandalus's power. Cole scrunched his brow. Why hadn't he noticed it before? The luminous power was plain enough now to be distracting. Hoping Dandalus might have some advice for him, Cole trotted over and met him at the edge of the grove.

"I see you have a visitor," Dandalus said, glancing beyond Cole at the oncoming horse.

"Better late than never," Cole replied.

Dandalus raised his eyebrows. "I don't imagine Destiny's power typically arrives late."

"But I lost Tessa," Cole said. "I feel so stupid."

"Are you serious?" Dandalus asked.

"I was in charge of her for less than an hour and she got taken," Cole said.

"You were unbelievably heroic, Cole," Dandalus said. "You saved her life."

"And brought her a message that let Sando follow me," Cole said.

"A devious ploy," Dandalus said. "I noticed the message but thought nothing of it. I assumed you would give it to her later."

"You couldn't sense Sando tracking it?" Cole asked.

"He must have used shapecraft. That can be hard for me to detect. Or he might have just used the obligation of delivery to follow you, which is basically impossible to discern from outside the agreement."

The hoofbeats drew nearer. Thunder neighed.

"Come fully into my sanctuary," Dandalus said, backing up. "We don't want to risk being overheard."

Cole stepped from the turf of the field onto the clover of the grove. The outside music instantly stopped, but he could still hear the approaching hoofbeats.

"Take heart," Dandalus said. "The Mare brought you here and has now come for you. You may not have strayed far from whatever scheme Destiny's power intended."

Cole frowned. Could that be true?

"You have your power back," Dandalus pointed out. "And by very unusual means."

Cole thought about that. "I wouldn't have gone in except to rescue Tessa."

Dandalus grinned. "Who would attempt such a feat? The choice to enter a slipstream is sacred in the echolands. Once a person goes in, they do not come out."

"People don't often survive?" Cole asked.

"To my knowledge, it has never happened," Dandalus said. "If you weren't both

living echoes, I doubt it could have happened. Even so, it was only made possible by your very strong will to live and your formidable power. Your will and your power helped ground you against the pull of the ether. As you held your ground, the slipstream pulled the impure shaping away. In miraculous fashion. Your power was hideously mangled. It is now completely, impossibly healed. I can no longer tell it was ever damaged.”

“At least I’ll have my Jumping Sword again,” Cole said, patting the hilt.

Dandalus gave a soft laugh. “Yes, but Cole, your ability extends far beyond energizing objects. That is a novel side effect compared to your full potential.”

“Really?” Cole asked.

“Can’t you feel it?” Dandalus asked. “Of course you can, but you’ve never really tested it, so you’re unaware of the possibilities. Cole, were it not for the threat posed by Nazeem, I might be your biggest enemy in the echolands.”

“You?”

“You naturally have raw shaping ability,” Dandalus said. “Since we rearranged how shaping functions, only the torivors have wielded such power here. The shapecrafters fake it in a limited way by maiming their power and the power of others. But you have it, Cole, and you have it *here*, as a bright echo. This is the original home of raw shaping. Your power will be stronger here than anywhere. Once you master it, you could undo much of what we’ve done.”

Cole swallowed. “So why am I not your enemy?”

“Because of the threat we face,” Dandalus said. “And because I can see your mind. Unlike the torivors, you don’t want to ruin the Outskirts or the echolands. You don’t want to rule here. You want to help. And we need help.”

Thunder gave a soft whinny.

Cole turned to find the horse standing at the edge of the field. Lost in the conversation with Dandalus, he had almost forgotten about her arrival.

“Hi, Thunder,” Cole said.

“Thunder?” Dandalus asked. “Ah, you felt the name, and Tessa confirmed it.”

“Just a minute, okay?” Cole asked.

The horse lifted her head up and down once. Cole took it as a nod.

“What can I do?” Cole asked.

“Here you should be able to shape much as they do in Sambria,” Dandalus said. “It takes time to develop that skill, especially to learn to make semblances. We designed Sambria so it is easier to shape than to unshape. We made the echolands very difficult to alter. But you will find that here, with your raw power, unshaping might be the

simplest skill to learn. The stabilizing measures we took did not anticipate power like yours.”

“Why do I have such a weird ability?” Cole asked.

“Your power is bound to your will,” Dandalus said. “Though we built a mortal realm here, living humans were never meant to come to the echolands. Those we brought arrived with especially potent abilities. It was how they destroyed the original versions of the Outskirts, and why I chose to place restraints on shaping itself. Furthermore, almost everyone who comes to the Outskirts is brought here by others or crosses over accidentally. But you came deliberately. Since power is connected to will, those who come deliberately tend to develop extra power.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“That isn’t all. Under the tutelage of Nazeem, shapecrafters have blurred the limits, shaping outside the boundaries we framers established. This endangers the way we restructured the shaping power. Eventually, everything could collapse back into raw shaping. You are evidence that it is starting to happen.”

“Can you fix the damage?” Cole asked.

“Not from here,” Dandalus said. “If I abandon this sanctuary, I would barely have time to destroy all we made and sweep it away as the homesong claims me. Which is why I don’t want to be discovered.”

“Did Sando see you?”

“He at least knew there was a powerful sanctuary here. I will depart before he can return.”

“If we stop Nazeem, won’t I still be a threat?” Cole asked hesitantly.

“A major threat,” Dandalus said. “Which is why I ask this favor. If you can thwart Nazeem, promise me that afterward you will seek out Rinka Pryer, the Grand Shaper of Creon. With your current abilities, she should be able to teach you how to get home. You will get what you want and protect the Outskirts as well.”

“I can make that deal,” Cole said with a huge smile. “I’ve wanted to get home from the start. You really think I can do it?”

“Now that I see your power without the shapecrafted barriers in place, I am confident you can. Defeating Nazeem will be the bigger obstacle. If you trained for a hundred years, you could not face him in a fair fight. The objective must be to prevent his escape. This could be possible. Everything depends on it.”

Cole nodded. “If Nazeem gets free, he takes over this whole world.”

“And if it gets bad enough, I flush it all, so he doesn’t trap a bunch of people, echoes, and lifeforces here with him.”

Cole shook his head. “Wow. No pressure.”

“Somebody believes in you,” Dandalus said, nodding toward Thunder. “Let’s see what you can do. Try to break the ground.”

“Here?” Cole asked.

“Not under our feet,” Dandalus said. “But inside my sanctuary. This domain is heavily protected, but unless I’m mistaken, the defenses won’t hold against your raw talent.”

Cole looked at the lush clover covering the ground about ten feet away. “How?”

“You feel your power,” Dandalus said.

“Yeah.”

“You remember how you pushed your power into the Jumping Sword.”

“Sure,” Cole said. “I get that much.”

“Try to feel that patch of ground like you feel the sword before pushing your power into it.”

“I’m always holding the sword,” Cole said.

“And that contact is helpful when you try to share energy. But you can also reach out and feel targets at a distance.”

Cole stared hard at the patch of clover. Could he sense the ground beneath? He tried to imagine the clover on fire. Or getting flattened. He tried to imagine the soil beneath splitting open.

Nothing happened.

“I don’t get it,” Cole said.

“Take my hand,” Dandalus said.

Cole let the warden’s hand close around his.

Suddenly, he didn’t just see the clover. He could sense the texture and temperature, as well as the density of the earth underneath. Small rocks were buried here and there in the rich soil.

“Look harder,” Dandalus said.

Cole found his perception going beyond the senses. As he focused, he understood the substance of the clover and the material of the dirt. He didn’t just see it or touch it or smell it or taste it or hear it—he *knew* it.

He felt connected to it.

The clover, the dirt, and the rocks were almost part of him. It seemed he might be able to wiggle them like fingers.

“Good,” Dandalus said. “Now draw on your power. Push power into your target and tell your target what you want it to become. See it another way.”



Cole could clearly sense his power. He had reached for it in vain so many times that he was still learning to trust that it was actually there. Was this how Dalton felt, able to create illusions in Elloweer whenever he wanted?

Cole focused on the largest rock within his target zone, mostly buried by soil and clover. He began to push some of his power toward the stone.

But how did he want to change it? What if he altered the substance of the rock into the same material as the soil? He could envision the necessary transformation.

He pushed harder and willed the change.

The rock dissolved into chalky brown matter.

Dandalus released Cole's hand.

Cole walked over, crouched, pushed aside some clover, scooped up some of the powdery remains of the rock, and let the fine brown dust sift through his fingers. "I did . . . something," he said.

"An outstanding effort for a first try," Dandalus said. "The echolands are designed to be unchangeable. You shaped that stone. Not into anything useful, but you transformed it."

"I was trying to make it into dirt," Cole said.

"Because you recognized and understood the dirt," Dandalus said. "A valiant effort."

"Were you letting me see things like you see them?" Cole asked.

"As best I could, yes," Dandalus said. "To get you started. Try it on your own."

Cole found that when he concentrated on another patch of ground, he could perceive the clover and the soil beneath almost as clearly as when Dandalus had held his hand. He shifted his attention to a large rock that protruded well above the clover. Should he try to make it into dirt as well?

"Don't change it," Dandalus said. "Unshape it. Destroy it. Reach out with your power."

Cole connected to the rock, pushed with his power, and tried to rip it apart. With a sound like a gunshot, the rock cracked in two.

"Not bad," Dandalus said. "Now really punish it."

Cole connected again, forcing more power at it than before. With a scowl, he tried to tear it to shreds, and the two halves shattered into fragments.

"You're getting it," Dandalus said. "Again. Same idea, but more thorough. Imagine the rock is going to kill you and your friends. It wants to conquer the Outskirts."

Cole felt his anger rise. Dandalus knew how to push his buttons. With a growl, he really released his power, and not only did the stone fragments get smashed to dust—

the ground where they rested split open.

“Very good,” Dandalus said. “You know how to smash now. And you know how to energize people and objects. That’s a great start.”

“People?” Cole asked.

“The same principle that enables you to energize the Jumping Sword should let you empower a person. You could enable a Sambrian shaper to practice her art in Elloweer, for example. Or awaken her slumbering powers here in the echolands.”

“What else can I do?” Cole asked.

“Your unshaping could be useful in combat,” Dandalus said. “Keep in mind that you can’t directly shape or unshape a person. It just won’t take. Anything with a will is very hard to shape unless the subject agrees. Even vegetation is resistant. Try that tree.”

Cole focused on the trunk of a tree. He could sense it, but when he tried to push his power into it, he felt no connection.

“See?” Dandalus asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “What about making stuff?”

“You could undoubtedly develop that skill over time,” Dandalus said. “It wouldn’t hurt to practice. Your power appears to be inexhaustible. But don’t get frustrated. Certain disciplines take time and practice. For example, try to close the wound you made in the ground.”

Cole centered his attention on the furrow he had left after pulverizing the rock fragments. He focused on the soil along both sides of the little trench, connected to it, drew on his power, and tried to force the earth together. Clumps of soil broke off, making the split bigger and messier.

“Tricky,” Cole said.

Dandalus raised a hand, and the split closed up neatly, covered once again in clover.

“Wait,” Cole said. “What did you do with your hand?”

“Nothing vital,” Dandalus replied. “Sometimes a gesture helps my focus. My concentration and power are key, not the gesture. But mind the lesson. If closing a little ditch is difficult, imagine what it takes to shape a complex object.”

“It dissolves into brown dust,” Cole said.

“It can,” Dandalus agreed. He crouched and scooped up some soil, then pressed it together with both hands. “Or you might produce an item like this.”

He held up a golden strand just like Jace’s.

“Whoa,” Cole said. “Does it work?”

“Not yet,” Dandalus said. “Somebody would have to charge it with Sambrian shaping energy.”

Grinning, Cole held out a hand. Dandalus passed the strand to him.

Cole felt instantly connected to the little rope. He pushed, and ghostly flames flickered over the strand. Flicking his wrist, Cole willed the rope to extend and wrap around a tree trunk. It did so perfectly, as if it were an extension of his arm.

“My parting gift,” Dandalus said. “I saw it in your memories and had to try.”

“Will it work when I leave here?” Cole asked.

“Anywhere in the echolands, if you provide the energy,” Dandalus assured him.

Cole willed the rope to release the tree and to retract into a little strand. It complied.

“Thank you,” Cole said. “This could come in handy.”

“Don’t go looking for trouble,” Dandalus reminded him. “Astride Thunder you will be hard to find. Best to remain hidden as much as possible.”

“Sneak attack,” Cole said. He glanced over at Thunder. The Mare snorted and stamped one hoof. She seemed to be calling him. He looked back at Dandalus. “Think she’ll take me to the Fallen Temple?”

Dandalus shrugged. “The Mare will take you where she takes you.”

Cole sighed. “They have Destiny.”

“And you now have your power.”

Cole nodded. This was better than before. Now he had weapons—a functional Jumping Sword, a golden rope, and his power. He had already planned to challenge Nazeem to rescue Mira, basically weaponless. He now had an extra princess to save, but maybe he had more of a chance for success.

“Bye, Dandalus,” Cole said.

“Be careful if you make your way to the Fallen Temple,” Dandalus suggested. “If you unshape too recklessly there, you could potentially weaken the barriers that hold Nazeem captive.”

“Good to know,” Cole said. How dumb would he feel if he accidentally freed Nazeem?

“Don’t forget the Weaver’s Beacon,” Dandalus said.

Cole decided not to admit that the relic had slipped his mind. “Sando didn’t take it?”

“He tried,” Dandalus said. “It would take stronger shapecraft than he or any of his lackeys possess to take the beacon without permission. One of his underlings got burned.”

“I’ll get it,” Cole said.

“No need to use it while astride Thunder,” Dandalus explained. “Nothing could conceal you better than the Mare.”

“Thanks again,” Cole said.

“Farewell, Cole,” Dandalus said.

Cole ran around Thunder and followed the channel. He knew that trying to ride the horse now could lead to him galloping away without the beacon.

It was a fairly long run before finding the shuttered lantern right where he had dropped it. Thunder trotted along behind. Cole retrieved the beacon and turned to face the horse.

Thunder crouched down, and Cole climbed on. As the horse stood, Cole could feel his power flowing into the animal. Thunder brightened, light seeping through the writhing clouds of her coat.

Cole patted the horse’s neck. “Are we going to save Destiny?”

Thunder took off like lightning.

## CHAPTER

# 33

## REUNIONS

Cole squeezed with his knees and clung to the silky mane as Thunder accelerated to a ludicrous speed. His previous ride seemed like a casual trot by comparison.

Thunder continued to draw power from Cole, his contribution enhancing their breathtaking velocity. Cole supposed it made sense that if the Mare was an embodiment of shaping power, then his power could boost her capacity.

The Pass of Visions quickly drew near. Just before they rushed into the pass, the terrain and sky transformed.

The sun glared down from overhead. The cliffs ahead were replaced by brown, crumbling ridges where half-dead shrubs and trees clung to life. Cole had not seen a struggling plant since coming to the echolands. Nor had he seen the actual sun! Off to one side, a meager stream trickled down a series of ledges.

The colors were less vivid. The music was gone.

Cole and Thunder had crossed to the mortal world.

But they continued at a furious pace.

The transition had been seamless. Cole had not suspected that Thunder could cross to physical Necronum so effortlessly, or that Mare could bring his echo along. Destiny had some serious power.

Beyond the broken ridges, Thunder and Cole returned to the echolands without slowing. The sky reverted to the even glow of a duskday, the music returned, and they raced across the plain of smooth, clear crystal.

Cole felt thankful for their speed. He wondered how fast they were going compared to Sando's gliders. Was there hope of beating Sando to the Fallen Temple? Maybe intercepting Destiny before they delivered her?

Thunder continued to draw on Cole's power and sporadically switched between the mortal world and the echolands. Cole thought it seemed the horse was going back and forth based on what terrain was more favorable. When riding in the mortal

world, Cole found he missed the music of the echolands, but the direct sunlight was welcome. As an echo in the mortal world, Cole felt no more tired or hungry than he did in the echolands.

Thunder never reduced her breakneck pace. Landscapes came and went. Eventually, when in the mortal world, they galloped under stars and moonlight. When they returned to the echolands, the terrain became richer in vegetation until Cole once again rode across short grass between lush groves and gardens. After returning to the parklike topography of the central echolands, Thunder stopped crossing to mortal Necronum.

Trees and blossoms sped by in a colorful blur. Cole's power showed no sign of depletion in spite of the constant usage.

Up ahead Cole heard momentous, fervent harmonies. So far Thunder had generally avoided noteworthy music, but they headed directly toward this new sound.

A large building came into view, expansive and low except for six tall, slender towers. Enclosed by a crenellated wall, the structure occupied the highest ground in the vicinity.

Cole wondered if this could be the Fallen Temple. The momentous music didn't seem threatening enough to match Nazeem's prison. But where else could they be?

Thunder slowed slightly as they approached an open gate in the wall. Startled echoes hurried out of the way as the horse zoomed inside. Cole received astonished stares as he streaked through courtyards and up stairways. Thunder galloped along covered walkways until skidding to a stop beside a large rectangular pool beneath the sapphire sky.

Cole stared in surprise. He had never seen standing water in the echolands.

Suddenly, the sky darkened and came to life with stars that reflected in the black water of the pool. The same masonry surrounded them, but he and the horse were now in mortal Necronum.

Thunder crouched down, and Cole slid off. He heard soft footsteps and waited as a figure moved along one of the covered walkways, coming toward the pool, carrying a small oil lamp and wearing a silver robe, the hood obscuring the face in shadow.

"Where are we?" Cole whispered to Thunder.

The figure stopped walking. "What?" a young, female voice said.

Thunder gave a soft whicker.

The figure threw back her hood and hurried toward the Mare. Cole gaped in astonishment, unable to breathe. It was Jenna.

She looked beautiful in the lamplight—the familiar face that he had longed to see

for hopeless months. The face that had lived in his imagination long before they were brought to the Outskirts, long before he had promised to find her. His first crush. For a long time seeing her again had seemed an impossible dream. Cole had almost died more than once since their last encounter. And here she was, alive and well.

“How did you get in here?” Jenna asked the horse, not even glancing toward Cole.

“Jenna?” Cole asked, hardly able to speak. He could still barely believe this was happening. It had never crossed his mind that Thunder might bring him to her. But there she was—dark hair falling in wavy curls, soulful brown eyes reflecting the glow of her lamp.

Jenna continued to ignore him.

She began petting the horse. Thunder once again had fiery highlights in her swirling coat. It had to be the darkness. Or maybe being in the normal world?

“Animals are not allowed inside the temple,” Jenna chided quietly.

“Jenna!” Cole repeated more loudly.

She turned away from Thunder toward Cole, wide eyes looking beyond where he stood. “Who said that?”

“Me. You know, Cole Randolph? From class?”

She did not appear to hear or see him. “I’m in no mood for sneaky echoes tonight,” Jenna said. She waved the hand without the lamp. “Show yourself.”

Cole felt a tingling, and her eyes met his.

Jenna gasped. “Cole?” she asked uncertainly.

“You see me?” Cole checked, excited and relieved.

She stared for a long, silent moment. “Yes.” She reached out a tentative hand, and her fingers sank through his chest. “Are you . . . ?”

“I’m a bright echo,” Cole said.

Jenna smiled widely. “Really? It’s really you?” She bit her lip, and her eyes welled up. “I didn’t think I’d ever see anyone from home again! Especially, well, you. But you’re here! Cole Randolph. Alive! Well . . . sort of.” She stopped and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, it’s been so long. I’m glad you’re bright.”

“My body is far away,” Cole said. “This horse brought me to you.”

Jenna scrunched her brow. “But I could touch it.” She patted the horse again to demonstrate. “How can an echo ride an actual horse?”

“Do you know about the Mare?” Cole asked.

“What mare? This one?”

“It’s a long story,” Cole said. “This horse can appear in Necronum and the echolands.”

“Wow,” Jenna said. “I’ve never heard of anything like that. Although . . . I guess after everything I’ve seen here, nothing should really surprise me anymore.”

“We’re partners for now,” Cole said.

“It’s so good to see you,” Jenna said. “Even if . . .” Her fingers passed through his shoulder.

“I’ve been looking for you since we got separated,” Cole said. “I found Dalton.”

“Really?” Jenna asked.

“If you haven’t seen anyone else from home, then you haven’t seen Dalton? What about a kid named Hunter?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t seen any of the others since I came here, and no one named Hunter, either.”

“We’re at the Temple of the Still Water?”

“Right,” she said. “Don’t you know where you are?”

“We came here really fast across the echolands,” Cole said.

“What were you doing in the echolands?”

“That’s an even longer story,” Cole said. “One I probably shouldn’t tell for now. It could get you into trouble. Do you like it here?”

“At the temple?”

“Yeah,” Cole said. “Do they treat you all right?”

“Not too bad,” Jenna said. “I’m a slave, but I’m good at weaving. I have my duties. It could be far worse.”

“You’d rather be home?” Cole asked.

“What do you think?” Jenna said, then noticed she had spoken too loudly and lowered her voice. “But there’s no way home, Cole. We’re stuck here. Even if we get home, we can’t stay there. And nobody would remember us.”

“There might be a way around all that,” Cole said. “Have you heard of shapecraft?”

“No.”

“That’s probably a good thing. But it can shape the shaping power. It can mess with the rules. I’m working on finding a way to get us home for good.”

A light came into Jenna’s eyes. “For good? You really think you can do it?”

Cole’s cheeks flushed. He’d always wanted to be her hero, even before they came to the Outskirts. After all he had experienced in the months since slavers took his friends, Cole still found the prospect exciting. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “But I believe there’s a way. And I’m not going to quit until I find it.”

“In the echolands?” she asked. “Are you a weaver too?”

“No, but I have some shaping power,” Cole said. “Keep an eye out for Dalton.”



When I went to the echolands, he was planning to come find you.”

“I haven’t seen him since Junction,” Jenna said. “Where did he end up?”

“I found him in Elloweer,” Cole said.

“You get around!” Jenna said. “How do you manage it as a slave?”

“I escaped the Sky Raiders,” Cole said. “Afterward I found a shaper who changed my bondmark to a freemark.” He stared at her. He knew he shouldn’t mention the princesses or Nazeem or anything that could turn her into a target. “I promised I’d come find you.”

“I remember,” she said. “You were very brave back at the wagons. Brave trying to free us and brave when they took you away. I was really worried about you. The Sky Raiders sounded like dangerous people. I worried you might be dead.”

“And now I kind of am,” Cole said with a grin.

“Lots of people cross over to the echolands,” Jenna said. “You left your body in a safe place?”

“I think so,” Cole said. “It was well guarded.”

“Do you need my help?” Jenna asked.

Cole glanced at the horse. “I don’t know. What can you do?”

“Normal weaving,” Jenna said. “I can summon an echo, bind an echo, all that. Have you lost where you crossed over? I can point you in the right direction.”

“I’m not going back to my body yet,” Cole said. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I can always use help from a friendly echo,” Jenna said. “How much time do you have?”

Cole glanced at Thunder. The Mare shook her head and stamped a hoof.

“Is the horse in charge?” Jenna asked.

“Kind of,” Cole said. “It’s a really smart horse. I don’t think I get to hang out. I think Thunder just knew I wanted to make sure you were all right.” Should he offer to have her cross over? Come with him? Wouldn’t that just lead her into horrible danger?

Thunder shook her head and stamped again.

“If you find a way home . . . ,” Jenna said.

“I’ll be back,” Cole promised. “I’m trying to get all of us out of here. I’ll come find you if I make it through this. Do you know about the Other?”

“Yes,” she said. “Be careful, Cole.”

“I can’t make any promises about careful,” Cole said. “But I’ll try not to die. I mean, you know, permanently.”

She looked distressed. “Can’t you stay awhile? I haven’t seen anybody from home for so long.”

Thunder shook her head and stamped twice.

“We’re kind of on a mission,” Cole said. The look of desperation in Jenna’s eyes caused a wave of guilt to roll through him. He didn’t want to leave her here alone. It was so tempting to invite her to join him, but he knew that would only put her in more danger, and he couldn’t sacrifice all his other friends for her right now. Not when they were captured in the afterlife and she was relatively safe. Life in the Outskirts seemed to mean making one impossible decision after another!

“The horse seems anxious,” Jenna said, looking down at the ground.

Cole faced Thunder. “I’m almost ready. I’m just saying good-bye.”

Thunder snorted.

“Dalton will come for you,” Cole said. “He and Hunter can probably help you escape.”

“Who is Hunter? Someone from the Outskirts?”

“My big brother. He came here before us, so none of us remember him. Think about whether you want to risk running away.”

“All right,” Jenna said.

Thunder crouched down.

“I better go,” Cole said, climbing onto the horse. He didn’t want to leave. He had waited so long, and this was so brief. But Thunder was clearly ready to go, and lots of people were counting on him. “Sorry it’s such a short visit.”

“Me too. But I’m so happy to see you. Good luck! I hope you’re back soon. Really soon.”

Thunder stood up.

“Bye, Jenna.”

The stars were replaced by the uniform light of a duskday, and they were back in the echolands. Thunder broke into a run, once again clomping through covered walkways and across courtyards until they galloped out of the gate.

The Temple of the Still Water receded quickly. At least he knew Jenna was all right. At least he got to see her one last time.

“Thanks, Thunder,” Cole said.

The Mare whinnied in reply.

If anything, Thunder seemed faster than ever. They zoomed through a rolling paradise of trees, shrubs, and flower beds. The pleasant music lulled Cole, who was growing accustomed to the thrill of the intense speed.

Distant hills came near and fell away behind them. Cole occasionally heard villages or other variations in the typical music of the landscape, but he saw no echoes. They rocketed across an abandoned universe of vibrant gardens.

At length, they entered a fairly large village. Thunder came to a halt in front of a cottage. Several echoes watched them curiously, paying special attention to the horse. Cole kept his lantern shuttered and tried to hold it inconspicuously.

Thunder crouched down, and Cole got off. "Here?" he asked, jerking a thumb at the cottage.

The Mare bobbed her head once.

"This isn't You Know Where. So where are we?"

Thunder offered no explanation.

Cole approached the cottage door and knocked. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed several echoes still paying attention to him.

A fairly tall woman opened the door. She was wrinkly and old, with bulging eyes. "Yes?" she asked.

"Hi," Cole said. "I'm not sure why I'm here."

"I know the feeling," the woman said wryly, glancing past Cole to the horse. "Is she yours?"

"Not really," Cole said. "I've just been riding her."

"Who is it?" called a female voice from out of sight.

"A boy," the woman replied. "Who are you?"

"Bryant Randolph."

The woman repeated his name loudly, then moved aside as a second woman bustled to the door. She was of medium height with a bony build and wild blue hair. Her face looked much younger than her hands. "Cole?"

"Callista!" Cole exclaimed. He hadn't seen the former Grand Shaper of Elloweer since she perished in the fight against Morgassa. "I was using my middle name."

"Cole, my boy," Callista said. "How refreshing to greet a familiar face. And a bright one at that." She glanced over her shoulder. "I'm staying with my sister, Enid. The accommodations aren't ideal to host company."

Cole looked at Thunder. The horse nodded and stamped.

"You arrived by horseback?" Callista inquired.

Cole unshuttered the Weaver's Beacon to disguise their conversation.

"Quite a light," Callista said.

"I'm trying to rescue Destiny Pemberton," Cole said. "I found her, but she was taken by servants of Nazeem."

“I’ve heard that name too much lately,” Callista said. “I wish I could be of service, but I lost my power when I arrived here. After cultivating my gift for my entire life, I can no longer muster a simple seeming, let alone a major enchantment like a changing.”

“I may be able to help,” Cole said, remembering what Dandalus had told him.

“How?” Callista asked.

“I finally found my power,” Cole said. “Give me your hand.”

She reached out, and Cole took it. Her skin felt loose, the finger bones slender underneath.

Cole pushed his power into her.

Callista’s expression brightened. She let out a giggle, followed by a cackle.

“How did you do that?” she asked. “I feel my gift as clear as day.”

“It’s part of what I can do,” Cole said.

Callista gazed at him. “Yes, I can sense your power now. It’s native to the echolands, isn’t it?”

“Raw shaping,” Cole said.

“Interesting,” Callista said. She released his hand. “Where are we going?”

“Three of the princesses are being held here in the echolands,” Cole said. “Tessa, Mira, and Honor. Tessa and Mira are at the Fallen Temple. I think we’re going there to save them.”

“You think?” Callista asked.

“I go where the horse takes me,” Cole said. “This is Thunder.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Destiny’s power.”

Callista hooted a laugh. “I see. So the horse found me?”

“She’s in charge,” Cole said.

Thunder whinnied and stamped.

“She wants to get going,” Cole said.

“All right,” Callista said. “Life had become wearying without my power. I felt so limited. I was hoping to find a way to be of service here. Guess I should be more careful what I wish for.”

Enid reappeared in the doorway. “You’re not really going?”

Callista hooted merrily. “I have my power back, my dear. You know I’ve wanted to help the resistance.”

“I so enjoyed your company,” Enid lamented.

“I’ll be back this way if I can,” Callista said. “If not, we’ll meet again in the next realm.” She turned to Cole. “Should I transform, or is there room on the horse for

two?”

Thunder bobbed her head and crouched down.

“We should both ride,” Cole said. “Thunder is really fast.”

Callista hugged her sister, then joined Cole beside the Mare.

“Can you still feel your power?” Cole asked, wondering if she would need a constant influx of power to use her abilities.

“Oh, yes,” Callista said. “I’m no novice. I just needed to find it again. My power had gone dormant. I feel good as new. I should be fine now.”

Shuttering his lantern, Cole climbed onto Thunder. Callista scooted into position behind him. The Mare stood, and the village became a blur. Soon groves and gardens streaked by.

Callista cackled. “Now this is a horse!”

Cole and Callista rode in silence. Cole wondered what their next stop would be. Another old friend? A stranger who could help them? Would they visit Necronum again?

Or could they be on their way to the Fallen Temple?

Cole had no way of knowing. The geography of the echolands remained a complete mystery to him. They might have been going north, south, east, or west. Or in circles.

The terrain varied between flat and hilly, always adorned with thriving vegetation. They crossed channels, using bridges on the broad ones but simply jumping some of the narrower slipstreams.

Cole tried to calm his mind. He might be about to fight Nazeem, but at least with Callista, he had a strong ally. She had put up a serious fight against Morgassa. Hopefully, Thunder would help as well.

After a long ride sinister music began to build directly in front of them. The harsh strains tempted Cole to try to steer Thunder in a different direction. Knowing what might be coming was different from hearing the actual music. It was not a happy tune. His mouth felt dry.

A huge, blocky structure loomed up ahead, composed of black stone and flanked by squat, square towers. A colossal iron gate appeared to be the only entrance. It was shut tight. With small windows and little decoration, the solid building looked more like a fortress than a temple.

Thunder pounded up to the gate and stopped.

“Who goes there?” called a male voice from within.

“We’re lost,” Cole answered. “Where are we?”

“Don’t play dumb,” the voice replied.

“I really don’t know,” Cole said honestly.

“You’re at Gamat Rue,” the voice replied. “And we invite you to move along. We’ve seen that horse before.”

## CHAPTER

# 34

## RESCUE

**T**hunder whinnied an unmistakable challenge.

“Try again, if you must,” the voice replied. “We deny access. Nobody enters Gamat Rue uninvited.”

“You tried to get in before?” Cole asked Thunder.

The horse bobbed her head.

“The legendary prison,” Callista said. “I thought we were going to the Fallen Temple.”

“Me too,” Cole said. “I guess this comes first. I have friends inside. Including Honor.”

Callista leaped down from Thunder.

Cole winced. It seemed like a long drop for an older woman, but by the time Callista hit the ground, she was a sleek, black jungle cat, not much smaller than the Mare.

“Open it up,” Callista said.

“Me?” Cole asked.

“That gate is reinforced with a host of enchantments,” Callista said. “We won’t enter by force. Use your power, Cole. Let’s see that raw shaping in action.”

Thunder neighed.

Cole swallowed.

The iron gate looked a lot more formidable than a rock in a field of clover. The violent music of Gamat Rue belonged to something that attacked you, not something you attacked.

Cole moved to slide off Thunder, but the horse sidestepped and shook her head. Apparently he was meant to stay aboard.

“Concentrate, Cole,” Callista said. It was odd to hear her voice coming from a big panther. “You can do this. They have your friends.”

That got his attention.

Cole stared hard at the gate. He could feel his power inside, some of it still flowing into Thunder. Jace was in there. Harvan as well, according to Dandalus. And Joe. Desmond. Ferrin. Drake. Honor.

An echomancer named Nandavi ruled this place. She had helped Sando abduct Mira. Cole would be breaking into her territory, giving her and her guards an extra advantage. But Dandalus thought Cole had a chance against Nazeem. So he should be able to handle this.

Maybe his raw shaping would help cancel out Nandavi's home-field advantage. He had Callista and Thunder with him. And his friends needed him.

Cole focused on the gate until he felt connected to it. The sheer bulk of it was intimidating. He could feel slippery tendrils of power coursing through it.

"Send out all your prisoners, and we'll pass you by," Cole called.

The voice laughed. "Move along. If you're not careful, we might just open the gate, boy."

"Don't bother," Cole said.

It was the final motivation he needed. That sneering voice represented people who had hunted him. People who had captured his friends. People who were willing to unleash evil forces that they had no power to control. People who had driven Winston to the Other.

Cole forced his power into the gate and sensed the defensive weavings melting away. He crushed the iron monstrosity with everything he had. Metal shrieked and crumpled. Hinges burst from their moorings. The gate tore apart and crashed down amid a hail of shattered stone.

Cole connected to the base of the wall at either side of the gateway and pulverized it. A landslide of stone blocks came roaring down. Gritty clouds of dust plumed outward. Voices cried out in alarm.

Cole smiled. The dramatic results of his demolition efforts felt extremely satisfying. He wanted to do more. Tearing apart the fort would be easier than he had expected. But his friends were inside! Until he could see how things were arranged beyond the gate, Cole knew that doing more damage could harm the people he cared about.

Besides, Thunder was now charging forward, loping confidently through the rubble. Cole squinted until they passed through the dust cloud. Callista roared from off to one side.

Thunder galloped into a broad, high hall filled with scattering echoes, men and



women. The echoes didn't match the formidable appearance of the building. Nobody had weapons or armor. As Cole and Thunder rumbled down the hall, they veered toward the flustered echoes, trampling whoever came within range. Callista pounced and growled, springing from victim to victim.

Cole felt his body stiffen but shook off the immobility with an effort of will. He opened the shutter of his lantern. Thunder ran so smoothly that Cole adjusted the beacon with no worries about falling. The glaring light immediately muted the music of the fortress and seemed to bother the echoes. He no longer felt the effects of anyone binding him, though he could see several echoes trying.

Thunder paused before a door. Cole forced his power into it and tore it to splinters. With the beacon shining, Cole felt energy feeding him faster than he could use it.

Echoes pressed against walls or dodged through doors to avoid the charging horse. Those who didn't were slammed to the ground or trampled.

The Mare faced another door, and Cole destroyed it, ducking as they rushed through and up a staircase. Cole blasted an iron door out of the way, and an angry echo charged from behind it. Rearing slightly, Thunder battered the attacker with her front hoofs, then stomped him when he was down.

Cole and Thunder raced down a hall lined with barred cells. They stopped where a familiar man stood clutching the bars of his enclosure, smiling at the intruders.

"Harvan!" Cole exclaimed.

"Look at you!" Harvan said with a laugh. "Riding in on the Mare!"

Cole focused on three consecutive bars of Harvan's cell and pushed with his power. Instead of bending them, he changed them to dust.

"You found your power!" Harvan admired.

"You were a weaver," Cole said.

"Once upon a time," Harvan replied.

Cole leaned down and reached toward him. "Take my hand."

Harvan complied, and Cole pushed power into him.

"Whoa," Harvan said, stepping back. "How'd you do that?"

"It's part of my ability," Cole said.

"Cole . . . it's back," Harvan said. "I feel it. Really?"

"Yep," Cole said.

"Great," a familiar voice said. "My one useful talent has been replaced."

Cole shifted his attention to a shorter, balding man in a neighboring cell. "Winston!"

“Don’t get too excited,” Winston said, squinting at Cole. “I’m just a dead echo. Little more than an imprint.”

“But still so very optimistic,” Harvan laughed.

“It was bound to happen, spending time with this guy,” Winston said, jerking a thumb at Harvan. “Next time we visit the Deadlands, I can join the party.”

“Is the beacon bothering you?” Cole asked as Winston continued to squint.

“It’s not pleasant,” Winston said. “But let it shine. You’ll need it here.”

Cole dissolved three more bars so Winston could get out. “Have you guys seen my friends?”

“Just the prisoners in this area,” Harvan said. “Sando is here somewhere, though. Just arrived.”

“Did he bring Destiny?” Cole asked.

“I don’t think so. Why would he have . . . Wait, you found her?”

“And he stole her.”

“He was just here trying to pry information out of me. Maybe half an hour ago.”

“Halt,” a shapecrafter called from down the hall, having just come around a corner. Harvan held up a hand, and the man froze.

“The echolands just got more fun,” Harvan said.

Thunder crouched down.

“Climb aboard,” Cole said. “We have places to go.”

“You two go on ahead,” Winston said. “That lantern is a little much for me. I’ll bring up the rear.”

“You follow,” Harvan said. “I won’t leave here without you.”

“I’m not going to go find a slipstream or anything,” Winston said, waving them away. “Go help the others.”

Harvan mounted behind Cole. Thunder rose, and they took off down the hall, slamming aside the shapecrafter Harvan had immobilized.

They dashed down more halls. Cole disintegrated doors as needed.

The echoes of Gamat Rue ran around in a state of panic. Cole met with little opposition. Thunder trampled whoever tried to take a stand. Apparently, the people who ran this place weren’t used to being attacked, especially by a rampaging horse and echoes they couldn’t freeze.

After descending a level, Thunder stopped by another wall of bars. Jace stood behind them. Joe sat in the neighboring cell.

Cole felt a huge surge of relief as a giant grin spread across his face. They were okay!

“Took you long enough,” Jace said, arms folded.

Cole turned some of the bars to silt. “That’s all I get?”

Jace grinned. “All right. Thanks for springing me. Nice horse. Cool trick with the bars.”

“Want to see a cooler one?” Cole asked, dangling his little golden rope and pushing power into it.

“No way!” Jace exclaimed, all casual pretenses disappearing. “Is that what I think it is?”

“A friend made it,” Cole said, tossing it to Jace. Though it had left his grasp, Cole maintained a gentle connection to the rope, still feeding it power.

Jace caught it, then made the rope lengthen and curl around some of the remaining bars. “All right,” Jace said. “Time for some payback.”

“Stay near me,” Cole said. “The light from the beacon will help protect you.”

“Should I get down?” Harvan asked. “I’m probably faster.”

“Not when I have this,” Jace said, making his golden rope twirl and dance.

Joe cleared his throat.

“Hi, Joe,” Cole said, turning more bars to dust.

“Good to see you, Cole,” Joe said. “Unbelievable.”

Thunder snorted.

“We have more to do,” Cole said.

Thunder proceeded more slowly, allowing Joe to keep up. Jace stayed with them using his golden rope, sometimes grabbing distant beams or bars to sling himself forward, other times coiling the rope behind him then uncoiling it like a spring. When echoes evaded Thunder, Jace often seized them with the rope and bashed them against the ceiling, walls, floor, and any other available surfaces.

They descended many stairs. The downward angle felt precarious to Cole, but he leaned back, gripped with his knees, and held tight with his free hand. Even on stairs, Thunder remained incredibly sure-footed, keeping the ride unnaturally smooth.

Although still muted by the beacon, the music became even more threatening the lower they descended. At the bottom of a serpentine stairway, Cole crumpled an iron door, and they entered a vast cavern.

Most of the ceiling and walls looked like the natural stone of a cave, though some masonry had been added. A multitude of shapecrafters was gathered on the far side of the cavern. At the center stood a woman draped in a dark, ostentatious outfit. She faced Prescia, who knelt motionless, hands bound. Sando was among those standing

nearby. Beyond the group, several cells at the far end of the cavern held prisoners, including Honor, Desmond, and Drake.

“The lady in black is Nandavi,” Jace said.

“All the most important prisoners are down here,” Harvan complained. “Why didn’t I make the cut?”

Jace used his rope to spring toward Nandavi and the group around Prescia. Harvan and Joe started running in that direction as well.

Thunder knelt down. Cole took it as a signal to slide off. Once his feet hit the stone floor, Thunder bolted forward with astonishing speed.

Cole drew his Jumping Sword but paused once it was out of the sheath. Jace, Harvan, and Joe stood frozen. Apparently, they had gone beyond the range of the protective lamplight from the beacon. Nandavi had her arms extended toward them, her lip curled in an angry sneer.

Cole glanced at the beacon. He had never tried to force power into it, but establishing a connection felt easy. Gritting his teeth, he flooded power into the lantern, and it brightened immensely. The brighter beacon nourished Cole faster than before. The more energy he sent out, the more he got back! Cole pushed even harder, and the glare of the beacon intensified to fill the spacious cavern. The music of Gamat Rue could no longer be heard.

Bathed in white light, Nandavi shrieked. Jace snatched her with the golden rope and began bashing her into other shapecrafters. Prescia lunged to her feet and froze a trio of shapecrafters. Thunder raced around the room trampling the shapecrafters who tried to scatter. Harvan and Joe reached the main group and attacked with their fists.

Cole’s attention shifted to the far end of the cavern, where Sando and a pair of large shapecrafters had retreated to Honor’s cell. Cole pointed his Jumping Sword at a spot high on one wall and shouted, “Away!” He launched into the air. When he reached the wall, he pointed his sword at the ground near Honor’s cell and shouted the command again as he kicked off the stony surface.

Rushing across the upper reaches of the cavern, Cole passed over where Jace, Harvan, and Prescia were fighting. In her panther shape, Callista had joined the melee as well. Cole kept pushing extra power into the beacon as he flew.

As he approached the rocky floor, the Jumping Sword slowed him enough that he managed to stumble to a stop without falling. Sando was already inside of Honor’s cell, his assistants at her sides, holding her as she squirmed.

Sando shot Cole a wink, then he, the two assistants, and Honor all disappeared.

Cole stared at the empty cell. What had just happened? Could Sando teleport?

Cole turned to his friends. Jace continued to use Nandavi like a wrecking ball. Thunder ran wild. Callista pounced and snarled, razor claws raking. Harvan threw punches. Joe had a shaperafter in a headlock. Prescia met Cole's eyes.

*He crossed over*, her voice spoke to his mind.

Cole wanted to kick himself. Of course! At Gamat Rue echoes could cross to the Necronum side. Sando had done it when he captured Jace and Joe.

How would he follow them?

*I can help*, Prescia communicated silently.

Extending his sword, Cole jumped to her.

"Send me," he said.

"Your echo will be vulnerable there," she warned. "Easier to kill."

"Fine," Cole said.

"You'll have to leave the beacon," she said. "It won't cross."

Since Prescia had given the Weaver's Beacon to him in the first place, Cole could think of no better person to leave it with. He set the lantern down, and the light output returned to normal.

"Hurry," Cole said.

The cavern disappeared, and he was back at the ruined version of Gamat Rue in Necronum. He stood in the same bare clearing where Sando had first immobilized them, surrounded by crumbling architecture. The sun shone down from a partly cloudy sky.

Honor, Sando, and his two henchmen were just beyond the far side of the clearing, hurrying away into the maze of ruins. One of the shaperafters carried Honor over his shoulder, while the other waved his arms, apparently weaving to keep her immobile.

When Sando saw Cole, he squealed, alarm in his eyes. His grimace showed his shiny gums. The old beggar produced a knife. "Halt!" he demanded, darting toward the henchman who held Honor.

Cole understood what he meant to do.

Echoes were much more vulnerable on this side.

Sando was going to kill Honor.

There was no time to think.

Cole aimed the Jumping Sword at a point a little ahead of where Sando was running. His power felt different here, still present, but a little less distinct, a bit harder to reach. Was it the absence of the Weaver's Beacon? Or maybe just being back in Necronum? Regardless, Cole forced extra power into the sword and shouted, "Away!"

He shot through the air low and fast like an arrow from a bowstring. Cole had never accelerated so quickly before—the influx of power had definitely boosted the jump.

The shaperafter holding Honor had stopped. She hung over his shoulder, immobile, defenseless. Sando had his arm raised to strike with his knife when Cole cannonballed into the wiry beggar, ramming the Jumping Sword through his back. Both he and Sando collided with the shaperafter who was weaving to keep Honor paralyzed. All three of them crashed to the ground. Cole kept his hand on the hilt of the Jumping Sword and could feel it jerking and jiggling as Sando hitched and quivered.

Suddenly, Honor could move. She thrashed, the shaperafter carrying her lost his grip, and she flopped to the dirt. Honor sprang to her feet, brushed Cole's hand from the hilt, placed a boot against Sando, and yanked the Jumping Sword from his body. The old beggar's spasms stopped. He stared at nothing, eyes blank.

Cole's mind raced at the sight of Sando's lifeless body. It didn't get any easier—every time he had to hurt someone, even to save himself and his friends, it still sent shockwaves through his system.

Honor turned to face the other shaperafters and found them motionless.

Cole got to his feet, perplexed by the unexplained stillness.

"I have them," Prescia called from the center of the clearing. Apparently, she had followed Cole across. The Grand Shaper of Necronum stood with the fingers of one hand fluttering. Keeping the two shaperafters immobilized did not seem to require much of her concentration.

"Hope you don't mind," Honor said, holding up the Jumping Sword.

"Not a bit," Cole replied. "That was quick thinking."

"Not as quick as you," Honor said. "They had me. I owe you my life. Thank you."

Cole shrugged, pleased and embarrassed. She was so tall and confident and brave and pretty. Had *he* really saved *her*? "You're welcome."

Honor returned the sword to Cole. "These two are prisoners now. Let's take them back across and lock them up."

"Can you bring all five of us across?" Cole asked Prescia.

In a blink they were back inside the cavern below the echolands version of Gamat Rue. Cole and Honor stood near the cells. The two shaperafters huddled inside of one.

"You can adjust locations a touch when you cross if you know what you're doing," Prescia explained, picking up the Weaver's Beacon.

The cavern was quiet. Nearly two dozen echoes lay strewn about the room, apparently lifeless. A smaller group cowered on their knees, heads bowed, hands laced behind their necks. Thunder oversaw the group, with Callista, Joe, and Harvan nearby.

“Cole killed Sando,” Honor announced.

“Nicely done,” Harvan said. “That was quick.”

“It had to be,” Honor said. “Sando was about to dispatch me.”

“Lucky I had the Jumping Sword,” Cole said humbly, sheathing the blade. His hands shook slightly, and he hoped no one saw. He turned to the cell holding Drake and Desmond. “Where’s Ferrin?” Cole asked the seedman.

Drake jerked a thumb at two trunks in a neighboring cell. “His pieces are tied up in sacks inside those two containers,” Drake said. “It was all they could do to stop his escape attempts. He almost got away twice.”

“Handy when you can pull yourself apart,” Desmond added.

Thunder whinnied and stamped a hoof.

“Thunder’s right,” Cole said. “I’ll open your cells, then let’s get out of here. We have one last visit to make.”

## CHAPTER

# 35

## UNITED

**M**y rope stopped working when you crossed over,” Jace said, holding up the small golden strand. “It shrank and wouldn’t respond to any commands.”

They stood outside of Gamat Rue, having exited the fortress without interference. The other shapecrafters had either fled or hidden.

“I have to keep powering it,” Cole said. “When I charged up the rope, I created a connection that kept drawing a trickle of power from me. Once I crossed over to Necronum, the connection broke.”

“Do you mind powering it up again?” Jace said. “I’d feel more peaceful.”

“Sure,” Cole said, touching the strand and nudging power into it. “Good as new.”

Jace lengthened it and shrank it. “You’re officially useful.”

“That’s a relief,” Cole said.

“What about Hunter? Shouldn’t his dead echo be around someplace?”

Jace lowered his gaze. “Sando knew Hunter’s reputation as an Enforcer. He decided Hunter was too dangerous—even as a prisoner—and threw his dead echo into a slipstream.”

“So Hunter will just skip the Echolands if he dies,” Cole said.

“It isn’t the funnest place I’ve been,” Jace consoled. “Tell me how you got your power back.”

Cole first explained how he met Harvan, Winston, Drake, and Ferrin. He went on to relate how they had freed Desmond and how Winston had died, allowing Cole to reach She Who Stands at the Summit. He then told about meeting Dandalus and finding Destiny. As Cole shared his tale, the others gathered to hear.

“You actually spoke with Dandalus?” Prescia asked, astonished. “His living echo?”

“His existence has been a secret,” Cole said. “But he never told me not to talk about him. He was planning to change the location of his hideout. He doesn’t want



anybody to know how to find him. Seems like She Who Stands at the Summit controls access to him.”

When Cole explained about Sando abducting Tessa, he didn't mention how exactly the beggar had traced him but couldn't help glancing at Desmond. The knight looked wretched.

Desmond cleared his throat. “I'm afraid my shortsightedness let Sando track Cole,” he confessed. “I accepted a message from Honor to Destiny, and promised to pass it to Cole if he found me. The message came to me through Sando, acting as Honor's agent in the matter. It was the price for keeping Honor out of the Fallen Temple. The deal seemed so advantageous and innocent—I was getting so much for so little. I knew Sando had to be up to mischief, but was blinded to the potential harm by the chance to help Honor from my otherwise hopeless position. At the time I agreed, it didn't seem likely I would ever see Cole again. I failed to anticipate how much damage the message could do if Sando used it to track him.”

“Sando fooled me in a similar way,” Cole said. “He offered me a bargain that seemed too good to refuse, and it led to Jace, Joe, and Mira getting captured.”

“I wanted to warn you when I gave you the message,” Desmond said miserably. “I tried more than once, but the oath bound me. I couldn't deviate.”

“I know the feeling,” Cole said.

“You still haven't explained how you got your power back,” Jace said.

“Almost there,” Cole said. He related how Tessa had jumped into the slipstream and how he went after her. They listened raptly as Cole told of handing Tessa over to Sando, and then how the ether stripped away whatever was blocking his power, leading to his escape from the slipstream using the Jumping Sword. He finished by telling how he had ridden Thunder to find Callista and then arrived at Gamat Rue.

“I take it the Fallen Temple is our next stop,” Harvan said. “When Sando's goons brought me here, I was worried I would miss it.”

“Wouldn't want to skip the most deadly place in the echolands,” Winston said. “I'll never understand how I went to the Other before you.”

“At least your dead echo remains,” Harvan said.

“I should go jump in a slipstream and get it over with,” Winston said. “I can't form new memories. I won't recall any of our upcoming adventures.”

“You can provide conversation,” Harvan said. “Losing you was a blow. This is better than nothing.”

Winston's expression softened. “I'm sorry, Harv. I didn't want to leave you. I'll stick around as long as I can.”

Thunder snorted and stamped.

“Those who want to rescue Tessa and Mira will go where Thunder takes us,” Cole said. “There could be stops along the way.”

“You know I’m with you,” Harvan said.

“Might be hard for all of us to fit on Thunder,” Cole pointed out.

“I can help,” Callista said, still in the form of an enormous black panther. “I’ll change anyone who wishes to join us into forms that can run with Thunder.”

“I’m in,” Jace said quickly.

“Me too,” Joe added.

“I go where Harvan goes,” Winston said.

“It’s been fun so far,” Ferrin said.

Drake gave a nod.

“I have a lot to make up for,” Desmond said.

“And of course I’ll come too,” Honor said.

Cole almost teared up, so great was his relief that he wouldn’t have to fight Nazeem alone. Together they would find a way to beat him.

“I’ll need to borrow your power, Cole,” Callista said. “I don’t have the strength to cause so many changes so close together. You should also energize Honor.”

“You can restore shaping power here?” Honor asked.

“Yes,” Callista said. “His ability is like none I have known.”

Cole took Honor’s hand and gently pushed power into her.

“I feel it again,” she said, surprised. “My power went away the moment I left my body behind.”

“That is typical after crossing to the echolands,” Prescia said. “The power remains within, but goes dormant. Some aspect of Cole’s ability wakes it up. Unlike the relics that need to constantly draw on his power, once your ability is awake, it should stay that way.”

“Will you be joining us against Nazeem?” Harvan asked Prescia.

She paused. “I admire your courage and enthusiasm. But have you all considered that entering the Fallen Temple might be the same as getting captured? Have you any idea the amount of power Nazeem wields inside of his prison?”

“He has Mira and Tessa,” Cole said. “We have to free them.”

“I understand the intent,” Prescia said. “But just because you enter the Fallen Temple voluntarily for a good cause does not mean you can prevail against the most powerful being in the echolands. You may not even stand a chance.”

“Thunder is Destiny’s power,” Cole said. “She brought me here. If she brings us to

the Fallen Temple, I think we can trust that we have a chance.”

Prescia sighed. “Do we blindly trust that Destiny’s power knows things we can’t presently understand? Even when it contradicts experience and reason?”

“Probably,” Cole said. “Thunder is the reason you’re all free. At first I thought I might be going to the Fallen Temple alone.”

Prescia looked at the Mare. “Nazeem has pursued Destiny more aggressively than anyone. What if her power is what he most wants? What if we’re handing him victory by—”

Thunder whinnied, stamped, and shook her head.

Prescia frowned. “Maybe we should at least keep Destiny’s power out of this. Cole could still lead a team—”

Thunder reared, whinnied, and bucked her rear legs.

“I think Thunder wants to come,” Cole said.

The Mare gave a snort and bobbed her head.

Prescia tossed up her hands in surrender. “Who am I to resist such a power? I could name reasons this strategy seems reckless and fraught with peril, but I cannot claim to see deeper or to know more. I will join you as well.”

“Sounds unanimous,” Jace said. “Should we get started?”

“You just got free,” Cole said. “Are you ready to charge back into danger?”

Jace shrugged. “All I’ve wanted since they took Mira away was to go help her.”

“How was it being a prisoner here?” Cole wondered.

“Lots of waiting, mostly,” Jace said. “Sometimes a bunch of talking. They wanted information from me. I guess they couldn’t read my mind.”

“Persistent refusal and a strong will can block out just about anyone,” Prescia said. “Well done.”

“Sando spent some time trying to talk me into different deals,” Jace went on. “Some sounded really good. But I’m not stupid. No offense, Desmond. Or you either, Cole.”

“None taken,” Cole said. “Good job.”

“The worst part was the frustration of not being able to help,” Jace said. “I hated all the waiting. Which is why I want to get started.”

“Nazeem is a torivor,” Cole warned. “I have met one before. Trillian, at the Lost Palace. He is incredibly powerful. We might not escape him.”

“Did you say a torivor?” Ferrin asked.

“Yes,” Cole said. “Why?”

“We had torivors in Lyrian,” Ferrin replied.

“We sure did,” Drake said, touching his chest.

“How many?” Cole asked.

“Dozens,” Ferrin said. “But they had been enslaved by wizards long before our time. I believe they were only shadows of their former selves.”

“They were still plenty tough,” Drake said. “And plenty creepy.”

“There are only two here,” Cole said. “They were imprisoned by shapers or they would be running the place. Going up against Nazeem will be no joke.”

“We know it’s dangerous, Cole,” Jace said. “We’re ready.”

Thunder bobbed her head and stamped.

“Are we agreed?” Harvan called out.

The others responded in the affirmative with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Thunder whinnied her approval.

Callista returned to her human form, approached Cole, and took his hand. “In honor of Thunder, I have a theme,” she announced, then proceeded to transform the others into horses, one by one. Cole steadily pushed power into her. He felt her need increase with each changing and upped his output accordingly.

Honor held up her hands when Callista faced her. “Wait!”

“You want to be a knight again?” Callista asked.

“If it isn’t too much trouble,” Honor replied.

“Someone will have to carry you,” Callista said.

“It would be my privilege,” Desmond said, already a large white stallion.

“Done,” Callista said, and Honor disappeared inside a full suit of gleaming armor.

Callista finished changing the others except for Winston, then released Cole. “Thanks, my boy. I couldn’t have done so many without you.”

“Happy to help,” Cole said.

“What about me?” Winston asked.

“I can’t change a dead echo,” Callista said. “You’ll have to ride.”

“Climb aboard,” Harvan said, now a chestnut stallion.

“Cole, I take it you would prefer to ride Thunder?” Callista asked.

The Mare crouched down.

“I think so,” Cole said, mounting up.

Callista morphed into a jungle cat again.

Thunder stood and started running. The others followed.

Cole was glad to hear the music of Gamat Rue recede behind them. He wondered how long it would be until they heard the sound of the Fallen Temple. Would there be other stops along the way?

Although Prescia had withdrawn her concerns, Cole could not help thinking them over as they rode. What if they really were no match for Nazeem? What if Destiny's power simply wanted to go out in a blaze of glory? Or what if the odds of success were tiny, but Thunder had decided an infinitesimal chance was better than none?

If Sando had captured all of them, he would have probably brought them to the Fallen Temple. Now they were going there voluntarily. Might this end up being the same as if Sando had nabbed all of them at the start?

Cole thought about Jenna and Dalton. With his power back, Cole had a chance of getting them home. If they could find the Grand Shaper of Creon, their impossible dream could become a reality. But if Nazeem caught Cole or sent him to the Other, the dream was dead. If he was the best chance Dalton and Jenna had to get home, was it fair to take this risk?

Nazeem had Mira. He also had Destiny. At the moment, as far as Cole knew, those two princesses were in much greater danger than Jenna and Dalton. If Mira was in the greatest danger, didn't she deserve the most immediate attention?

Cole had long struggled with which friends most deserved his help. He had debated the issue with Dalton. Did his old friends have a truer claim on him? Did the desperate needs of new friends like Mira trump all other problems? He was finally beginning to realize that there was simply no good answer to those questions. The old friends mattered. So did the new ones. They all mattered. He just needed to help whoever he could, as best he could, when given the chance. Right now that meant Mira and Tessa.

Besides, if Nazeem got free, he might destroy the Grand Shaper of Creon and end any hope of getting home. This threat needed to be dealt with.

Hopefully, success was possible.

\* \* \*

They rode for a long time. Drawing only gently on Cole's power, Thunder held to a pace that let the others keep up. Paradise streamed by all around them, meadows and groves, hills and shrubs. The music soothed Cole. He realized this might be his last experience, at least on this side of the Other. He tried to absorb the beautiful sights and to enjoy the smooth speed of Thunder. Part of him wanted the ride to last forever. Another part wanted to get there and end the anticipation.

At last, menacing music began to throb up ahead. It carried a stronger warning than any of the tunes Cole had yet heard. At a deep, instinctive level, Cole wanted to

flee. He had to resist trying to get Thunder to turn away.

The temple came into view, dominating a large clearing. Cole wondered if it had always been entirely black, or if that happened after Nazeem was imprisoned there. There were many towers and spires, the eight tallest equal in height. A high wall protected the complex. A few skeletal trees stretched above the wall, bare branches contorted. A channel ran directly in front of the wall, spanned by a narrow bridge that led to an open gate. The whistling symphony of the slipstream was all but drowned out by the ominous harmonies of the Fallen Temple.

Thunder stopped just short of the drawbridge. Cole looked around at the horses with them. A knight rode on one of them. Winston rode another. And there was the panther.

“Should we return to our natural forms?” Callista asked.

Thunder nodded and stamped one hoof.

“Need help?” Cole offered.

Callista returned to her true form. “Not to restore them,” she said.

One by one, the others changed back from their horse shapes.

Honor dismounted before Desmond was changed. “May I remain in this guise?” she asked.

Thunder nodded and stamped.

Callista changed all the others but left Honor as a knight.

“The gate is open,” Ferrin said. “Are we expected?”

“It’s always open,” Prescia said. “Nazeem has always welcomed visitors. This whole area is difficult to perceive from afar. I’m sad that any echoes ever came here voluntarily.”

“The music alone would keep me away,” Joe said.

“Let’s get this over with,” Jace said.

“Cole should carry the beacon,” Prescia said. “Keep it as bright as you can. Perhaps it will help shield us from his influence.”

She returned the beacon to Cole, and he accepted it.

Jace twirled his rope around, making sure it functioned. Honor drew her sword. Cole met eyes with Harvan, who gave a nod.

“All right,” Cole said. “Ready?”

“Lead the way,” Jace said.

Cole smiled at his friend. It was nice to have him here. “Die bravely.”

“Already did,” Jace replied.

Cole wondered how long he had been waiting to use that line.

Thunder started forward, hoofs clomping on the bridge over the channel. Cole unshuttered the lantern as he rode through the gateway.

## CHAPTER

# 36

## RAMARRO

**M**uch like when he had entered the Lost Palace, Cole found that the appearance of the Fallen Temple changed after passing through the gateway. For one thing, most of it was gone. Only the glossy floor remained, along with some carpets, pillars, and furnishings. A swirling sky radiated eerie light. The tempo of the music had slowed, becoming murkier and more secretive.

Thunder came to a halt, muscles twitching. Cole's friends remained with him, but otherwise the entire area appeared deserted. He could see a long distance in every direction but wondered how much of the surrounding landscape was illusory. How far would he travel before striking an invisible wall? Nothing in view matched the terrain Cole had seen moments ago outside the Fallen Temple.

"Where are we?" Ferrin asked.

"I'm afraid we're wherever Nazeem wants us to be," Prescia said.

A resonant chuckle from the sky confirmed her words.

Cole felt the hair raise up on the back of his neck.

"Not very comforting," Joe remarked.

"I'm a little glad to already be dead," Winston said.

"No need to talk like that," Harvan scolded.

"I don't see anybody," Jace said. "Where should we look for the princesses?"

"We had better find Nazeem first," Callista suggested.

"Welcome to my domain." The rich voice descended from the sky and rose from the ground, casual in tone, but powerful enough that the vibrations buzzed in Cole's chest. "You may as well relax. You are here to talk, not to fight. None of you can challenge me here. Each of you will perish if I elect to terminate you."

"Where are you?" Jace called out, rope held ready.

"I am everywhere," the voice said. "And nowhere. I may reveal myself to some of you in due time."



“Where are my sisters?” Honor demanded.

“It’s a shame your mother did not name you Patience,” the voice said. “Or Politeness. Do you require a demonstration? If you insist. Try to move. Any of you. Try to speak. Try to blink.”

The shutter of the Weaver’s Beacon snapped closed.

Cole became completely immobilized. He couldn’t exhale. He couldn’t twitch.

“Some of you are trying to resist me,” the voice said. “You may as well attempt to lift a mountain. Go ahead and try. Keep in mind as you fail that you only remain here because I have not sent you to the Other. I would converse with Cole.”

Suddenly, Cole stood in a field of thick mist that rose to his shins. The low mist stretched to the edge of sight in all directions under a pale, hazy sky. A pair of bulky stone chairs sat facing one another. A man sat in one of them. Cole recognized him.

“Nazeem,” Cole said.

“I asked some of my earlier followers to give me a name,” Nazeem said. “That was what they chose. Nazeem. It suited my purposes at the time to obscure my identity. But you know my true name.”

“Ramarro,” Cole said.

Ramarro grinned. “That’s right. Please, sit down.”

Cole sat on the unoccupied stone chair. It was warmer than he had expected but not particularly comfortable.

“We met briefly,” Ramarro said.

“When I was under the First Castle,” Cole said.

“You’re worried about your thoughts,” Ramarro said. “You’re concerned you may reveal something to me. Don’t fret. I already know everything in your memories. You unveiled your history by trespassing here. You suspect I’m bluffing. I’m not. I know about Hunter, and Jenna, your family in Arizona, the day you lost your first tooth, your conversation with Dandalus, your hopes of keeping me trapped here—everything. Which means you can relax.”

“I don’t feel very relaxed,” Cole said.

“I suppose not. Is there any emotion so terrible as suspense? You and your friends are completely in my power. I can do whatever I choose with you. For the moment I have not harmed any of you. But I could do so many things. Your imagination can hardly begin to envision the horrors that might await. This must produce an awful suspense.”

“What are you going to do with us?” Cole asked.

“What I do depends entirely on you, Cole.”

“Why?”

“It depends on what you’re willing to accept,” Ramarro clarified. “You possess an intriguing power. I would rather recruit you than destroy you. Same with your friends. But if you insist on resistance, my retribution will be swift.”

“You’re trying to take over the world,” Cole said.

“I have succeeded,” Ramarro clarified. “The echolands and the Outskirts are now mine to claim. You furnished the key to my prison.”

“What do you mean?”

“Destiny’s power,” Ramarro said. “Without it, I would eventually have found another way. With it, I am free. Her power will permit me to return to the physical Outskirts. Once there, my portion of the Founding Stone will allow me to exit this prison.”

“Dandalus was right,” Cole said. “You have a piece of the Founding Stone.”

Ramarro’s grin made Cole think of a skull. “Your memories are a treasure box of information. So many delicious conversations! Dandalus trapped me here, you know. Gwendolyn as well. She Who Stands at the Summit. I had not confirmed that they remained in the echolands. Thank you.”

Cole broke eye contact with Ramarro. What had he done? Would there be grave repercussions for revealing them to Ramarro? How bad would it be?

“Don’t worry, Cole,” Ramarro said. “Both of them expected me to see your mind. They knew I would learn about them through you. I’m sure Dandalus told you he could destroy the Outskirts and sweep the echolands bare in a desperate attempt to intimidate me.”

“Did it work?” Cole asked.

“Dandalus can throw nothing at me that I cannot counter,” Ramarro said. “He could probably damage or destroy the Outskirts. I’ll believe that much. It’s a fragile world. He might even be able to flush all life from the echolands. But not if I resist him. Not if I stop him. Even if I’m wrong, he certainly lacks the power to remove *me* from the echolands. If he had the strength for that, he would have done so long ago. If Dandalus works some unknowable form of doomsday shaping that I can’t counter, if he unmakes the Outskirts and departs with all life, and if I am all that remains, so be it. I will have indirectly destroyed all who opposed me, and I will still remake the echolands as I desire and repopulate it at my leisure.”

“What about Trillian?” Cole wondered.

Ramarro gave a nod. “You have traveled far and wide, Cole. You have met most of the key players in this game. Dandalus can remove Trillian no more than he can

remove me. If Dandalus destroyed everything he could, the two torivors would remain. Perhaps Dandalus hopes the prospect of confronting another of my kind would intimidate me. I've never shied away from a fight, Cole. I have every reason to believe that I could either overpower or recruit Trillian. In fact, if he so desired, I might even let him go home."

"Why don't *you* go home?" Cole asked. "What's the point of taking over the echolands?"

Ramarro's eyes flashed. "At first it was simply for experience. Now revenge is in the mix. How can I explain it? Imagine you went to live in a house full of mice. And somehow, against all odds, the mice imprisoned you and took over the house. How would you feel?"

"Stupid."

Cole saw a flicker of anger in Ramarro's eyes. "Yes, I suppose so. And frustrated? And wrongfully stripped of your natural right to govern the house? You would sit and watch inferior beings control what should have been yours. If some of the mice decided to cooperate, you might be willing to share the house with them, so long as they never again forgot their place. Especially if some of the mice had qualities that made them more interesting than their more common brethren. You would need to teach the rest a lesson."

"But what if some old shaper got rid of all the furniture and all the mice?" Cole asked.

"You would have the satisfaction of knowing the mice had been exterminated," Ramarro said. "And the prospect of doing whatever you chose with the house. You could refurnish it however best suited your taste, and repopulate it with mice if you so desired."

"I'm an interesting mouse?" Cole asked.

"More than most," Ramarro said. "You killed Sando, for example."

"That makes me interesting?"

"Sando was very effective. He commanded my servants in the echolands, just as Owandell oversees my minions in the Outskirts. If Owandell has been my right hand, Sando was my left."

"And I killed him. Doesn't that make you angry?"

"It makes me curious. Sando was cunning and powerful. You lack his experience, and yet you bested him. I prefer to work with the best. Which is why I now invite you to join the winning side."

"As your servant," Cole said.

“You’re a human, not a torivor,” Ramarro said. “Would you make a mouse your equal?”

“I wouldn’t want to live in a house full of mice,” Cole said. “I’d prefer other people.”

Ramarro stared at him. “I have lived among my kind forever. I departed in the spirit of exploration. It was time for something new. And humans hold more charm than mice. I intend to control this world until I tire of the experience.”

“I have a feeling you’re not telling me everything,” Cole said.

Ramarro laughed. “Then trust your feelings. Would you tell everything to a mouse? If a scientist had experiments in mind, would he confide fully in his lab rats? The portion I have told you is all true. Your choice is simple. You can join me, or you can watch helplessly as I do whatever I choose with you and your friends.”

“If I join you, won’t I be just as helpless?” Cole asked.

“You’ll be helpless either way,” Ramarro said. “But by siding with me you will enjoy preferential treatment. When the outcome is certain, why not join the victors? Defy me and you will wish you had stayed in the slipstream and coasted to your next phase of existence.”

“What about the others?” Cole asked.

“They will have their own choices to make,” Ramarro said. “But if they resist, and you join me, I may show them mercy.”

“What would mercy look like?”

“I may send some to the Other,” Ramarro said. “I may borrow aspects of their shaping power without torturing them. But I make no promises. I will do according to my pleasure. This is not a negotiation. Either pledge to serve me, or refuse and face my wrath.”

“Don’t you already know how I’m going to answer?” Cole asked.

“Not for certain,” Ramarro said. “I know how you intend to answer. I also know how you should answer. Humans are so inconsistent that although I could make a very educated guess, I can’t be sure about the outcome until the choice is made. You want to deny me. But it would be better for you and your friends if you change your mind. I would prefer it as well. I would rather not torment and destroy some of the most engaging mice. You could pursue a long, appealing life, Cole. I can unlock abilities in you and your friends that you could never achieve alone.”

“Can you send me home?” Cole asked.

“I know of this desire,” Ramarro said. “I would have to study the matter after my release. I expect that I could return you to Arizona, along with those friends who

came here from your world. Would I? Perhaps one day as a reward for years of loyal service. There is also a chance you would figure out how to do it on your own while serving me. I will make no promises.”

“Because you can’t lie,” Cole said. “And you won’t send us home.”

“That could be part of the reason,” Ramarro said. “I find another more compelling. I don’t bargain with vermin. The choice is before you. I must have an answer. The fate of many depend on your decision. Be wise.”

“I’m trying,” Cole said. He squirmed on the stone chair. He wanted his reply to come easily. He wanted to turn down Ramarro. Cole hated that he was hesitating. He could feel the finality of this decision. Was he ready to die? To condemn his friends to die? Was he ready to let Ramarro strip his power and shape it into a monster? Was he ready to spend eons imprisoned? Was he ready for long ages of torture? Could he condemn his friends to that fate?

Then again, would he really be condemning his friends? Wasn’t it still their choice to make? And hadn’t they all made this choice before, in different ways? What would Jace say to this offer? Harvan? Honor? Would they even pause? Wouldn’t they have already shot him down? Just by coming here, hadn’t they committed to stand against Ramarro?

In one way or another, Cole had been making this decision ever since he came to the Outskirts. Had he been content as a slave, or had he risked everything for the chance to escape? Had he stood against monsters that should have defeated him? Had he risked his life for his friends? Had he sometimes even risked fates worse than death, like when he fought Morgassa, or when he came to the echolands in the first place?

Cole had fought all along to protect his freedom and to free his friends. Would he now surrender that freedom voluntarily? Just because his enemy was calm, eloquent, and powerful, would Cole ignore that he was evil? Would he abandon his beliefs? If he served Ramarro, who would he become? He would end up like Owandell. Or worse. How many people would he harm?

The words Dandalus had shared returned to Cole. If the whole meaning and purpose of life hinged on what he chose to love and who he chose to become, the answer became clear. His heart already knew he should deny Ramarro, and now his mind was fully catching up.

“Dandalus planted those thoughts so you would choose this way,” Ramarro warned.

“Who is trying to save this world, and who is trying to destroy it?” Cole replied. “Who is protecting young girls, and who is stealing their powers? I admire Dandalus!

I'd much rather obey his ideas than yours."

"So be it, little fool," Ramarro said. "Lamentable but not unexpected. I suppose it is—"

Cole wasn't listening. He had focused on the stone chair where Ramarro sat. He connected to it and heaved his power into it along with an avalanche of angry thoughts.

The chair exploded into fragments.

Howling, Ramarro twisted, landing on all fours. He glared at Cole, a fathomless rage behind his eyes, furious music blaring.

Standing, Cole opened the shutter of the Weaver's Beacon and pushed with everything he had—all the defiance, all the hope, all the protectiveness, all the power. The lantern went supernova, casting a brilliant glare across the misty landscape. Some of the energy from the beacon fed back into Cole, and he increased his output. He kept one hand on the shutter, holding it open in case unseen forces tried to close it again.

The lantern was too bright. He couldn't see anything.

Had Dandalus deliberately warned him about this too? How much of this showdown had Dandalus anticipated?

The light blinded Cole, but he remained unfrozen. Nobody was attacking him. He could no longer hear the music of Ramarro's anger—or any music, for that matter.

Cole didn't want to dim the beacon too much, but he eased back on his effort enough to see.

The misty landscape was gone. The Fallen Temple looked as it had when they had first entered it. Cole stood beneath an eerie sky on a glossy tile floor surrounded by pillars. An altar sat directly ahead of him. He had moved forward from Thunder and his companions, who all remained frozen.

"You made me an offer!" Cole called. "Here is mine. Give me Mira, Tessa, and Durny. Let us depart in peace, and I won't rip this place to pieces."

"You have chosen to endure my wrath," Ramarro said, his disembodied voice falling from the sky and rising from the ground.

"Bring it on," Cole replied.

## CHAPTER

# 37

## DESTINY

**T**he ground quaked. The pillars rocked. In the distance a swarm appeared. At first Cole thought of the men with gliders who had attacked him near the Farthest Mountain and outside the sanctuary where he had found Destiny. As the swarm approached, Cole saw it was a cloud of monstrous bats.

*Good, you want him angry, Prescia communicated in his mind. Glancing over his shoulder, Cole saw her standing immobile with his other companions. It means he's not in full control.*

The freakish bats dove at him, the swarm becoming narrower and longer as it targeted him. Cole debated whether to draw his sword. It would mean taking a hand off the lantern's shutter.

*The Weaver's Beacon poses a problem for Ramarro, Prescia went on. He wanted you to serve him because it would have destroyed your protection. If you gave him your will, he would have obtained absolute power over all of us. Don't be fooled. He suggested he can destroy us at his whim. He is indeed powerful here, but he is also overconfident. Ramarro can't outright lie, but he can be wrong. Keep resisting. He can't bind you right now. He's trying to scare you. Pour on the power.*

Cole forced his full power into the beacon, and once again he could see nothing. The music of the beacon sounded like a single clear note, a ringing chime near the upper threshold of apprehension. Cole braced for the bats to collide with him, but the impact never came. The quaking ceased.

"This grows tedious," Ramarro said, his voice emanating from everywhere. "Why strive against you within my prison when I could go free?"

Thunder whinnied fiercely. Cole heard hoofbeats coming his way. He dimmed the beacon enough to see the Mare charge by him, gallop to the altar, and rear, front hoofs lashing wildly.

“Thank you for this gift, Cole,” Ramarro said. “It would have cost more time to make my escape without her power. Like the other Pemberton girls, Destiny parted willingly with her ability, at the urging of Owandell, who acted on my behalf. Here in my presence, her power must obey me.”

Thunder bucked and curveted around the altar, neighing angrily.

*You need to see what is happening, Prescia counseled. Ramarro is masking himself and this temple in seemings. Much of his power here comes from his ability to make us believe his illusions. He is in our minds. This place is more dream than substance. Change the nature of the light from the beacon. Demand that it reveal our surroundings as they are. Don't just make the beacon bright. Command it to let you see.*

Again Cole remembered the words of Dandalus. Could the Weaver's Beacon do more than shine brightly? Could it help him see farther, deeper, truer?

Still channeling his power into the lantern, Cole increased his output to maximum, concentrating on the nature of the light. The brilliant whiteness overpowered his vision. What if the whiteness were clear instead? What if it penetrated everything, revealed everything?

The blinding glare vanished.

Instead, Cole saw that he stood in a courtyard surrounded by the gray walls of a temple. Thunder reared near the altar, frozen now, the sparkling glory of her power flowing out of her like seeds on the wind. The power gathered and swirled around a human form, gigantic and demonic, with searing eyes. The more power flowed from Thunder, the more discernable the huge figure became, wreathed in a fiery whirlwind of shaping energy. The image made Cole recall how he first saw Ramarro—a devilish visage in the midst of emerald fire beneath the First Castle.

“We will meet again shortly,” Ramarro vowed. “I look forward to continuing our disagreement in a less restrained environment.”

If the slipstream was a hybrid of wind and water, the vortex around Ramarro combined wind and fire. Even though he was standing a good ten paces away, gusts of heat washed over Cole as the blazing energy whirled.

At the center of the flaming funnel, the ghostly form of Ramarro held up a small stone. Glowing white, it looked like the corner of a much larger block. It had to be the fragment of the Founding Stone! Ramarro was about to cross back to mortality. He was almost free.

Cole knew his time was running out. He had to act. Taking his hand from the shutter of the lantern for the first time since putting it there, Cole drew the Jumping Sword.



Leaping straight at Ramarro didn't feel right. The surrounding fire seemed too hot, the wind too violent. Getting blown around and barbecued wasn't going to help anyone.

Cole glanced over his shoulder to where his comrades still stood frozen. He saw the golden strand in Jace's hand, and an idea struck.

There was no time to scheme and debate. Cole could not afford to second-guess his instincts. He leveled his Jumping Sword at the ground beside Jace and shouted, "Away."

Cole streaked low and fast to the point near Jace, landing at a run and stumbling several steps past his friend before returning to his side. After sheathing the Jumping Sword, Cole yanked the golden strand from Jace's grasp and dashed back toward Ramarro.

Power no longer exited Thunder to unite with the blazing vortex around Ramarro. The Mare's coat was now a flat gray, having lost the bewitching appearance of churning clouds. Eyes ablaze, Ramarro held the white fragment of the Founding Stone above his head, the stone perhaps twenty feet above the temple floor.

"Until we meet again," Ramarro said, his voice triumphant. "It will not be long."

The fiery whirlwind around the torivor sped up. Ramarro appeared more tangible than ever, his form solid and dark except for those incandescent eyes.

Beacon in one hand, borrowed strand in the other, Cole focused on the piece of the Founding Stone and commanded the rope toward it. The golden rope flashed forward like a striking serpent, stretching through the firestorm and curling around the white stone. Upon contact, Cole flooded his power into the rope, willing it toward the fragment.

Everything stopped.

Ramarro no longer moved. The flames no longer whirled. No music rang out.

This had happened to Cole once before.

Still forcing his power into the Founding Stone through the rope, Cole focused on the intense white glare of the little fragment. For a moment whiteness saturated his vision, and then Cole stood before an elderly man in an elegant maroon robe trimmed with gold. It had not been long since Cole had last seen his friendly face.

"Hello," Cole said. He could still feel the golden rope in his hand, although in this vision his hands were free.

Dandalus smiled. "We meet again. You have a definite knack for getting into predicaments."

"Ramarro has a piece of the Founding Stone," Cole said.

“I am aware of that much,” Dandalus replied. “Would you open your mind to me? It makes it easier for me to catch up.”

“Sure,” Cole said.

“Oh my,” Dandalus said. “This is worse than I thought. I see you met my living echo.”

“You were very helpful,” Cole said.

“So I gather,” Dandalus replied. “And you are very brave and resourceful. Thank you for your many efforts. I feared the day would come when one of the torivors would breach our defenses. And now it has.”

“Can you stop him?” Cole asked. “Can I? Can we?”

“It’s too late to prevent Ramarro’s escape from the Fallen Temple. He is already on his way to the physical world. Destiny’s power provided the bridge he needed. Once in the Outskirts, his chunk of the Founding Stone will enable him to travel elsewhere.”

“Last time I energized the Founding Stone, didn’t you banish him?” Cole asked.

“When we met previously, Ramarro was using the Founding Stone to communicate,” Dandalus said. “When you energized me, I was able to interrupt that communication. Ramarro could not bring his power to bear against me from his prison in the echolands. But once part of him crosses to the physical world, I will not be strong enough to stop him from using the stone to transport himself out of the Fallen Temple.”

“Can I get the stone from him?” Cole asked.

“Too late,” Dandalus said. “Ramarro is already more in the physical Outskirts than the echolands. When I return you to the timestream, Ramarro will be gone before you can act.”

Cole slumped. “Then we lost?”

Dandalus smiled. “Not yet. Though I can’t stop Ramarro from using the Founding Stone to exit the Fallen Temple, he is now in a somewhat precarious situation. Having brought that piece of the Founding Stone to the echolands, it cannot return. He must use it with one foot in the physical world, and one in the echolands. As soon as he uses the stone to exit the Fallen Temple, he will lose his hold of the fragment. If you keep the fragment energized, at that crucial instant, I should be able to alter his destination.”

Cole got excited. “Could you change his destination right back to the Fallen Temple?”

“Perhaps, but it would be the Fallen Temple in physical Necronum,” Dandalus

said. “The connections of the Founding Stone do not extend into the afterlife. The temple was designed to hold Ramarro on the echolands side. If a disciple brought him another piece of the Founding Stone, he would be able to go anywhere. It would not take long to do so.”

“Isn’t trapping him for a little while better than nothing?” Cole asked.

“It would be,” Dandalus said. “But I have another destination in mind.”

“Oh!” Cole said. “The Lost Palace?”

“No,” Dandalus said. “We worked a lot of specific holdings and bindings to keep Trillian at the Lost Palace. If I just drop Ramarro in there, he would escape in no time.”

“Then where?”

“Back when we were dealing with the torivors, one of my fellow framers of the Outskirts was a man called Kendo Rattan. He was the first Grand Shaper of Creon, and he created a vault called the Void as a possible prison for one of the torivors. In the end, we went with the Lost Palace and the Fallen Temple.”

“Will the Void hold him?” Cole asked, his hopes resurging.

“It will for a time,” Dandalus said. “We never combined our efforts to perfect it, but it remains a unique and effective container. Ramarro will find himself floating at the center of an empty space, with no way to set himself in motion, reliving the same looping millisecond over and over again. If he gets himself moving, the space in that vacuum is designed to always return him to the center, no matter what direction he travels. And each millisecond, he would return to the center as well.”

“That sounds pretty good,” Cole said.

“Kendo was extremely talented,” Dandalus said. “There would be no material within reach for Ramarro to shape, and all his efforts would be undone each millisecond. But he would be in the physical Outskirts, with access to the fullness of his powers. If he can learn to reshape time or space fast enough, he could theoretically work his way free. He would have as long as he needed to practice.”

“How long will the Void hold him?” Cole asked.

“I can’t say,” Dandalus said. “Unless I’m a fool, days certainly. Weeks probably. Months possibly. Years if we’re lucky. Almost anyone else would have no chance of ever escaping unless they had outside assistance.”

“Will his followers break him out?” Cole asked.

“We’ll have a couple of advantages,” Dandalus said. “The first is his followers won’t know where he is. The second is the Void is deliberately located in the farthest reaches of Creon, in a location both secret and difficult to access. I have all the

physical Outskirts at my disposal. If I could move Ramarro anywhere, I would put him in the Void.”

“Sounds good to me,” Cole said.

“There is a chance I will fail,” Dandalus said. “But I believe I can do it. After I return you to the timestream, use the piece of the Founding Stone to converse with me again. I can tell you whether I succeeded, and we can form plans together.”

“Okay,” Cole said. “To make sure I have it all clear, you’ll send me back to the timestream, and I’ll try to keep the piece of the Founding Stone energized.”

“Yes,” Dandalus said. “Without your power, I will be unable to interfere. Are you ready?”

“No pressure,” Cole muttered. “Yeah, we better do it.”

“I’m counting on you,” Dandalus said. “Keep the rope in contact with the stone and keep the power flowing.”

“You got it,” Cole said.

Dandalus winked. “See you soon.”

Cole was back. Ramarro vanished almost instantly. Cole wasn’t sure if he actually saw him for a split second, or just remembered seeing him before taking his break with Dandalus. The flames snuffed out, but the sparkling wind of Destiny’s power kept twirling. The golden rope still clung to the piece of the Founding Stone. Still pushing his power into the fragment, Cole willed the rope to retract, bringing the stone to him.

“What happened?” Jace cried out. “Is he gone?”

Looking over his shoulder, Cole found that all his friends were unfrozen. He supposed that made sense. Ramarro was no longer there to bind them.

“He escaped,” Cole said. “But we may have sent him to a new prison. Let me check.”

Cole focused on the stone fragment and returned to the white vision where Dandalus awaited.

“Well done,” Dandalus said. “Ramarro is in the Void. He will be baffled for the first while. I wish I could see his face, but after placing him inside, I severed all contact between the Founding Stone and the interior of the Void. It should help ensure he has no foothold to the outside world.”

“Great,” Cole said. “What now?”

“Find the princesses and any friends you wish to rescue and then return to me,” Dandalus said. “If they touch the fragment of the Founding Stone while you energize

it, we should all be able to converse. I have urgent news that involves you, Honor, Desmond, and Destiny.”

“You can’t tell me now?” Cole asked.

“Enjoy this moment,” Dandalus said. “You earned it. Release the prisoners. Then we’ll talk.”

The vision ended, and Cole once again stared at his companions. He realized that for them no time had passed.

“Nazeem is actually Ramarro the torivor,” Cole said. “I connected to the Founding Stone using Ramarro’s piece of it. Dandalus left an imprint of himself in the stone. When I energized the imprint, he was able to send Ramarro to a prison made long ago in Creon. It should hold him for a while.”

“Well done, Cole,” Honor said.

“Dandalus wants us to find your sisters,” Cole said. “I think he has news.”

“At least we can see the temple now,” Honor said.

“Many of the defenses went down when Ramarro escaped,” Prescia said. “I can feel Miracle and Destiny now, and should be able to lead us right to them.”

Harvan approached Cole and clapped him on the back. “We weren’t much of an army for you.”

“Don’t underestimate your contribution,” Prescia said. “Every person here pitted their will against Ramarro. It was a distraction for him, and provided support for Cole.”

“Especially you, Prescia,” Cole said. “Thanks for your encouragement in my head.”

“I helped as I could,” she said with a small bow.

“We saw it all,” Jace said. “Except when you were trying to burn our eyes out with that lantern.”

“Whoops,” Cole said. “You couldn’t close your eyes!”

“A little blindness is better than losing the fight,” Jace said.

“Is Thunder all right?” Ferrin asked.

Cole turned and saw the horse roaming near the altar.

“She no longer is hosting Destiny’s power,” Prescia said. “Otherwise, she appears unharmed.”

“Is that Destiny’s power in the air?” Cole asked, pointing at the sparkling whirlwind not far from the horse.

“Yes, holding to the pattern Ramarro established,” Prescia said. “I expect if we bring Destiny here, she can reclaim it easily.”

“What are we waiting for?” Jace asked. “Let’s find the princesses.”

## CHAPTER

# 38

## TAKEN

**T**hey found Mira in a cell deep beneath the temple. Cole dissolved an iron door and then discovered he couldn't move or speak when he saw Mira inside. Jace ran to her and hugged her. They grinned and laughed.

Cole watched.

He felt too overwhelmed to speak. Until that moment he hadn't realized how much he had given up on rescuing Mira. His bargain with Sando had gotten her captured, and, at some level, he had believed there would be no way to set things right.

Not that things were totally right.

Ramarro was now in a temporary prison. Once he was free, Cole had a feeling that nobody on either side of the revolution would be celebrating.

But that problem would come later. For now, against all odds, here was Mira, alive and well. She approached him.

"I'm so sorry," Cole said.

"It's not your fault," Mira said. "You came all this way to help me?"

"He saved the day this time," Jace said. "Cole has his power now, and it was enough to send Ramarro into a new prison instead of letting him get away."

"Ramarro?" Mira asked.

"Nazeem's real name," Cole said. "He's a torivor like Trillian."

"Will the prison hold him?" Mira asked.

"For a bit," Cole said. "We're not sure how long."

Mira searched Cole's face. "What about Tessa?"

"Huh? You don't know?" Cole said.

"No," Mira said, looking more vulnerable than Cole had ever seen her.

"She's here," Cole said. "I found her, but Sando stole her from me. Ramarro never told you?"

Mira shook her head.

“What a jerk,” Cole said.

“She’s all right?” Mira asked, as if not daring to hope yet.

“Come see,” Prescia said from down the hall, standing before another iron door. “She’s in here.”

Mira’s expression lit up. “Really?”

Cole, Jace, and Mira hurried down the hall to Prescia. Cole pulverized the door. Mira glanced at him, eyebrows raised. “Not bad.”

“I’m good at breaking stuff here,” Cole said.

“Mira?” The hesitant voice came from the cell.

Mira turned, tears springing to her eyes, trembling hands covering her mouth. “Hi, Tessa.”

Tessa walked out and stood before her sister. “I hoped I would see you here. Hi, Cole. Did you get caught too?”

Cole laughed. “We came to bust you out. But we accidentally freed Ramarro.”

She gave a solemn nod. “I had a feeling he would escape.”

“At least an imprint of Dandalus in the Founding Stone helped me send him to another prison.”

“Was he the same as our Dandalus?” Tessa asked.

“Pretty close,” Cole said.

Mira stepped forward and hugged her sister. Tessa hugged her back, but her body stayed rigid, her eyes wide.

“I missed you,” Tessa said in a small voice.

“I missed you, too,” Mira said. “More than I can say.”

“Is this ever going to end?” Tessa whispered.

“Aren’t you the one who is supposed to know stuff like that?” Mira asked.

Tessa shook her head. “The things I most want to know never come to me.”

They ended the embrace.

“Dandalus wants to tell us something,” Cole said.

“I should get my power first,” Tessa said. “That much I can feel. And there is somebody in that cell.” She pointed.

Cole unshaped the door.

An older man exited through the empty doorway.

“Durny?” Mira asked in disbelief.

“Hello, Miracle,” he said, swinging his arms uncomfortably. “I came here to help but only managed to join the prisoners.”

Mira went to him and they hugged. "Thank you for saving me back at the proving grounds," she said.

"It was my duty and privilege," Durny replied. He studied Cole. "Looks like you saved the day again, my young friend. I'm beginning to think you were the best purchase I ever made."

Cole grinned. "That's right. You used to own me."

"Nobody will own anybody before long," Mira said. "We'll stop my father."

"Father isn't the problem anymore," Tessa said. "If we can't stop Nazeem, he'll enslave us all."

"We'll find a way," Honor said firmly.

"Let's get Destiny's power," Jace said.

Cole walked beside Harvan as they backtracked out of the temple dungeon. The princesses walked with Prescia, Callista, and Jace. Harvan nudged Cole. "If the purpose of life is amassing stories, you have been a most profitable acquaintance."

"There may be more to all of it than stories," Winston inserted.

"And there may not be," Harvan said. "This is already one of the best. Harvan Kane and the Dauntless Outsider. Something like that."

"Now I just have to finish it," Cole said.

Harvan waved away the comment. "You're just saying that so there will be a world to tell it in."

"It's no joking matter," Winston said.

"Which lends the humor added importance," Harvan maintained. "Sadly, the story is moving on to a place I can't follow."

"Drake and I were having the same concerns," Ferrin said, falling in beside them.

"Ramarro will only return here after he has wiped the Outskirts clean," Harvan said. "We'll watch and wait."

"We could move on," Drake said. "If our chance to influence the outcome is done, the timing may be right."

"I've been having some of the same thoughts," Winston said.

"You don't count," Harvan said. "You're already dead."

"I can still end my lingering," Winston said.

"Who will be around to foil me?" Harvan asked. "Who will question my tales and call my bluffs?"

"I don't believe drawing critics will ever be a problem for you," Winston said.

"Am I that abrasive?" Harvan asked.

"You're not shy," Winston replied diplomatically.



“You’ll also attract admirers,” Ferrin said. “You’re not afraid to be yourself, Harvan, and who you are demands attention.”

“I knew I liked this one,” Harvan said, putting an arm around the displacer. “If Winston rides the slipstream, I may be in the market for a partner in crime.”

“I could be convinced to linger for a season,” Ferrin said. “I’ve seen plenty of hardship and adventure, but friendship remains a novelty worth exploring.”

When they exited the building, Destiny went directly to her swirling power, entering the sparkling whirlwind without hesitation. Her hair whipped around as the vortex shrank into her. She staggered when it was gone, but she was smiling.

Her eyes shone as she looked toward her sisters. “It feels like it never left. I didn’t know how much I had missed it.”

“I know what you mean,” Honor said kindly.

Destiny looked to Cole. Her intonation became graver. “It is time we spoke to Dandalus.” The words sounded like more than the whim of a young girl.

Cole got out his captured piece of the Founding Stone. “Whoever can get a hand on the stone can visit with me,” Cole said. “The princesses should for sure.”

Mira, Tessa, and Honor all touched the stone. Jace got his hand in there as well. Cole forced his power into the stone, and a moment later they all stood in the presence of Dandalus, surrounded by featureless whiteness.

“Greetings, Destiny, Miracle, and Honor,” Dandalus said. “Congratulations on surviving your trials so far. I’m sorry for your tribulations.”

“We all have our hardships,” Honor said. “Cole informed us that you have news?”

“Cole allowed me access to his mind,” Dandalus said. “I saw how he left the bodies of Jace, Joe, and Miracle with Hunter and Dalton. I also saw where he left his body when he came across at the Temple of the Robust Sky, in a chamber beside Honor, Destiny, and Desmond. The Founding Stone connects everywhere in the physical Outskirts, so out of curiosity I searched for your bodies. It took a little time to locate Miracle, Jace, and Joe. They are in the care of members of the Unseen. But I was disturbed when I checked on the bodies in the Temple of the Robust Sky.”

“Why?” Cole asked.

“They were gone,” Dandalus said.

“Did you find them?” Honor asked.

“After some searching, yes,” Dandalus said. “And now that Cole has recharged me I have found them again. They remain in motion.”

“What’s going on with them?” Jace wondered.

“They were taken by Enforcers,” Dandalus said. “Your physical bodies are rapidly

moving toward Junction in a pair of prison wagons.”

“Oh no,” Cole said.

“I suggest you hasten back to your bodies and deal with the problem,” Dandalus said.

“Don’t we have to get near them to get back?” Cole asked.

“Not with the Founding Stone,” Dandalus replied. “Ramarro was specifically imprisoned at the Fallen Temple. He needed to at least partly return to physical Necronum to use the Founding Stone. But you suffer from no such bindings. Your contact with the Founding Stone should let me return you to your bodies anywhere in physical Necronum.”

“Then we should do it,” Honor said.

“All except Cole,” Dandalus said. “I take it you want Joe and Desmond restored to their bodies as well. Cole must be the last to go. Once he no longer energizes the Founding Stone, I will be rendered powerless.”

“And I can’t bring the piece of the Founding Stone with me,” Cole said.

“It must remain in the echolands now,” Dandalus said. “Like your Jumping Sword, and the golden strand crafted by my living echo, it cannot return from the afterlife. Only your echoes can make that journey.”

“What about our clothes?” Mira asked uncomfortably.

“Unlike Cole’s Jumping Sword, your actual clothes did not cross over with you,” Dandalus said. “The clothes you have on are duplicates more akin to illusions.”

“We should go,” Honor said.

“I agree,” Dandalus said. “The more time you have on the road in the prison wagons, the better you can plot your escape.”

“I’ll still have my power,” Cole said.

“Yes, but it will not work as easily as it does here,” Dandalus said. “You will have to learn how to control it in the physical world while inhabiting your physical body.”

Cole shook his head. “The problems never end.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Dandalus said.

“And not when an all-powerful torivor could break loose any day,” Jace added.

“Send us,” Mira said. “We’re ready.”

“We’ll be in different places,” Cole reminded her.

“Which is why we better get started,” Mira replied. “Don’t worry, Cole. If you can’t get free, we’ll break you out.”

“Those in the prison wagons may want to consider playing dead at first,” Dandalus said. “No need to let your captors know immediately that you have returned from the

echolands. It could work to your advantage.”

“Sound strategy,” Honor said.

“Are all of you besides Cole in agreement that I can return you to your bodies?” Dandalus asked.

They all agreed.

“Off you go, then,” Dandalus said.

Cole was once again alone with Dandalus.

“I’ll go get Joe and Desmond,” Cole said.

“I’ll be here when you want me,” Dandalus said.

Cole stopped putting his power into the stone.

“Where did they go?” Desmond asked.

“Back to their bodies,” Cole said. “Joe, Mira, and Jace are all right, but everybody at the Temple of the Robust Sky has been taken by Enforcers. We’re in prison wagons headed for Junction.”

“They’re carting us to Owandell,” Desmond said.

“Probably,” Cole agreed.

“Don’t worry, Cole,” Joe said. “We’ll come find you.”

“We’ll try to save you the trouble,” Desmond said.

“The piece of the Founding Stone will remain behind,” Cole said. “My sword won’t come either.”

“A spare sword?” Winston asked with interest,

“You’re dead,” Harvan said. “We’ll let Ferrin have it, as long as he chooses to linger.”

“I do have some experience with a blade . . . ,” Ferrin said.

“Here is the Weaver’s Beacon,” Cole said, handing it to Prescia. “It saved us more than once.”

“I’m glad,” Prescia said. “But the beacon was just a tool. You did most of the saving, Cole. I’ll do my best to help you on the other side as well.”

“Thanks,” Cole said. He exchanged farewells with Callista, Durny, Drake, Ferrin, and Winston. He looked over at Thunder. “Will she be all right?”

“She’ll be extremely popular,” Harvan said. “You know how difficult it is to find a horse here. I’m hoping we’ll be good friends.”

“Thank you, Harvan,” Cole said. “I was so overwhelmed when I got here. I’ll never forget you. Thanks for all your help.”

“I’m glad I got to tag along,” Harvan said. “You’re an extraordinary young man, Cole. And your story is only just beginning. Continue as you have commenced, and I

predict that nothing will be able to stop you.”

“We better get going,” Desmond prompted.

“Okay,” Cole said, holding out the piece of the Founding Stone. Desmond and Joe laid their hands on it, and Cole pushed his power into it.

Everything went white, and Dandalus was back.

“May I have your permission to return you to your bodies?” Dandalus asked.

Desmond, Joe, and Cole all agreed.

Desmond and Joe vanished.

“Well done today, Cole,” Dandalus said. “I fear some of your greatest challenges remain. But your power could save you. Learn to master it. Rescue the Outskirts. If you end up in Junction, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Dandalus. Bye.”

And then Cole could see nothing.

Rough, wooden planks rattled beneath him as the wagon jolted along an uneven road. Cole was on his side, hands bound behind his back, ankles chained together. A hood covered his head.

A flood of forgotten sensations overtook him. Hunger. Thirst. Soreness. Exhaustion.

He once again had an actual, physical body.

Though uncomfortable, the sensations were all familiar.

But one important thing was different from when he had left.

When he turned his attention inward, Cole could feel his power burning bright.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every book poses unique challenges. It was both fun and difficult to create the echolands. I had never taken my characters to the afterlife before, and I wanted to create a fantasy version of the hereafter that would feel a little different from anything we had seen. Such efforts take lots of time, and consequently require help and patience from my publisher.

Once again it has been great working with Liesa Abrams and the good people at Simon & Schuster. I also received generous understanding from my original publisher, Shadow Mountain, as they wait for me to finish *Dragonwatch*, the first book in the sequel series to Fablehaven.

Liesa helped me improve *Death Weavers*. She has the wonderful gift of being able to recognize and articulate how to make stories better. I also got useful feedback from my agent, Simon Lipskar, who also helped work out scheduling issues with my publishers. I am grateful to work with smart, talented people.

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This has been a turbulent year for my family. My last grandparents passed away and tight deadlines placed challenging restraints on my time. My thanks go out as always to my understanding wife and my fantastic kids.

My gratitude also extends to you, the reader. Thanks for sticking with this series and for telling people about it. One more to go. I'll talk more about that in my Note to Readers.

## NOTE TO READERS

There is now just one book left in the Five Kingdoms series. Hopefully, Book 4 left you as excited to read Book 5 as I am to write it!

For the past few years I have released two books each year. With that aggressive publishing schedule, I found myself sliding a little farther behind with each book. I generally wear one of three hats—writer, promoter, or dad. I need to write the books, I need to help readers discover the books, and I need to be there for my wife and kids.

Deadlines have placed a lot of strain on my life over the past few years. I have put in the work to be proud of everything I have written, but I believe that going forward, to keep the level of quality high, and for the good of my family, I need to slow down the pace a little. I'm not retiring or anything—just hoping to get closer to one book per year than two.

As a result, it looks like *Dragonwatch*, my sequel series to *Fablehaven*, will come out a little later than initially planned. Instead of fall 2016, look for it in spring 2017. And that in turn will push my final book in the Five Kingdoms series to fall 2017. And yes, that will once again be two books in a year. Stop paying such close attention!

This postponement is being done to ensure I have time to make both of those books the best they can be. I can't wait to revisit the people and places of *Fablehaven* with my *Dragonwatch* series, and am excited to write the finale to Cole's adventures in the five kingdoms.

And of course there will be more books after that. . . .

To connect with me, look up my author page on [Facebook](#), follow me on [Twitter](#), and check out my Instagram account [@writerbrandon](#). My website is [brandonmull.com](#). If you like the stories I'm telling, share them with people. Many of us discover the books we read through recommendations from friends and family.



**Brandon Mull** is the author of the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling *Beyonders* and *Fablehaven* series, as well as the *Candy Shop War* series. He resides in Utah, in a happy little valley near the mouth of a canyon, with his wife and four children. Brandon's greatest regret is that he has but one life to give for Gondor.

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

# FIVE KINGDOMS

TIME JUMPERS



# Brandon Mull

AUTHOR OF THE FABLEHAVEN AND BEYONDERS SERIES



—  
BOOK 5

**Brandon Mull**

ALADDIN  
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

FOR MY DEAR FRIEND AMY, FOREVER ADMIRER AND BELOVED

## CHAPTER

# 1

## PRISONERS

Cole could not see anything.

He lay stretched across the rough wooden planks of a wagon bed, the hood over his head somewhat dampening the impact as the boards rapped against his skull. Judging from the sound of the hoofbeats and the rattling of the vehicle, they were moving briskly along a dirt road. His hands were bound together behind his back with strong, slender cords. Iron manacles encircled his ankles, biting into his skin when he tried to pull free. The coarse material against his face threatened to induce a claustrophobic panic, though he could breathe reasonably well.

Unpleasant sensations assailed him—hunger, thirst, soreness, exhaustion.

Having just returned from the echolands, he found ownership of a physical body startlingly unfamiliar. He had not felt hungry in a long while. Or sore.

Cole had been warned before returning to his body. He knew he had been captured, along with Destiny, Honor, and Desmond. Their bodies had been left behind at the Temple of the Robust Sky when they had departed for the echolands, and their defenseless physical forms had fallen into the power of Enforcers.

The prelate Elana had placed their bodies in a secret room for safekeeping. Clearly something had gone wrong. Wherever Elana was now, Cole hoped she was all right.

“Hello?” Cole called, not at full volume but hopefully loud enough for any other prisoners sharing the wagon to hear.

“Cole?” a voice answered, slightly muffled.

It was Destiny. Tessa. Mira’s youngest sister, who he had just rescued in the echolands.

“I’m here too,” Honor said, her voice clearer and louder, though somewhat dampened as well. Strong and independent, Honor was Mira’s second-oldest sister and had helped in the search for Tessa. “Desmond?”

There came no reply.

“Anybody else?” Honor tried.

“It may just be the three of us,” Cole said. “Are you tied up too?”

“Manacles on my hands and feet,” Honor replied over the creak and rattle of the wagon. “Hood over my head.”

Cole wondered if he should be insulted that only his feet had actual manacles.

“I can’t see either,” Destiny said. “My hands are tied. My legs are chained.”

“Me too,” Cole said, deciding that he was considered a lesser threat than Honor.

“Can you spring us, Cole?” Honor asked.

It was a fair question. In the echolands, Cole had finally unlocked his power. His shaping ability had become inaccessible after being mangled when he fought Morgassa in Elloweer. Once his power had become active, Cole found he could awaken the shaping power in others, and he had learned to transform objects in the echolands with his will, as if he were a gifted shaper in Sambria.

Cole could still feel his power smoldering inside. It had been absent for so long, the presence was unmistakable.

In the echolands, he had recently used his power to throw down castle walls. The manacles should not stand a chance. Let alone the fabric of the hood covering his face.

Mustering his focus, Cole willed the unseen manacles cuffing his ankles to dissolve.

Nothing happened.

Cole tugged with his legs against the restraints. The unforgiving iron dug into his skin just as before.

Cole willed the fabric of the hood to split apart. He drew on his power with all of his effort.

Not a single thread popped.

“I don’t know,” Cole replied. “I can feel my power. But it doesn’t seem to be working. I can’t make it connect.”

“I worried it might be different back in a physical body,” Honor said.

“Why should it be different?” Cole asked.

“The echolands are made of a whole different kind of matter,” Honor said. “You didn’t have a physical body there, and you weren’t affecting physical material. I’ve never heard of anyone developing their power as quickly as you did in the echolands. You have the same abilities here, but using those skills in the physical world may take more time to develop.”

Cole relaxed his mind. Without straining, he tried to push his power at the iron cuffs gripping his ankles. Again he got no result. He refocused on the hood, to no avail.

“I’m sorry,” Cole said. “I can’t even tear the hood. But my power is with me.”

“They’re probably taking us to Owandell,” Honor said. “Once we reach Junction, I should be able to access my power. I’ll set us free.”

“No,” Destiny said, her voice calm and certain. “Going before Owandell will lead us to the paths we must walk.”

For a long moment Cole listened to hoofs clopping and scuffing against the dirt. The wagon jerked, swayed, and creaked.

“That settles it,” Honor said, resignation in her tone. “No escape attempt. We wait.”

“What paths?” Cole asked. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” Destiny said, sounding like herself once more.

“No hints?” Cole asked.

“I’m sorry,” Destiny said. “It just comes. I never know more than what comes.”

“No apology needed,” Honor said. “Any guidance helps.”

In the echolands, Cole had seen Destiny’s power in action. Separate from her, in the form of a horse, her power had played a key role in helping him find Destiny, save his friends, and prevent the return of Nazeem, who was really a torivor named Ramarro. Before leaving the afterlife, Destiny’s power had been restored to her. And now it was speaking through her.

“We let the Enforcers take us to Owandell?” Cole checked.

“Yes, if we have any sense,” Honor said. “No good comes from trying to avoid Tessa’s prophecies.”

“We don’t resist at all?” Cole asked.

“We can try whatever we want after we meet with Owandell,” Honor said. “Until then we use patience.”

“It’s hard to be patient with a bag over your head,” Cole observed.

The wagon slowed to a stop.



“Are we there?” Cole asked.

“I don’t think so,” Honor said in a tone so hushed, Cole could barely hear her. “I’d have some access to my power if we were in Junction. They’re probably changing horses.”

Cole heard the clink and jangle of chains at the rear of the wagon.

“Play possum,” Honor suggested quietly.

Cole went limp as he heard doors open. The unsteady glow of torchlight flickered up through the bottom of his hood. Somebody was checking on the prisoners. Breathing softly, Cole stayed limp.

“Still there,” a gruff voice affirmed.

The door closed.

Harnesses jingled and hoofs clopped. A horse whickered. Shortly the wagon lurched forward.

“They’re in a hurry,” Honor said.

“I don’t want to see Owandell,” Tessa said in a voice nearly too small to hear.

Cole almost replied that her own power was to blame for their decision to go submissively before the head of the High King’s secret police. But since Owandell had used shapecraft—the ability to tamper with the shaping power itself—to take Destiny’s power when she was only nine and give it to her father, Cole decided sensitivity was required.

“You must hate him,” he said.

“Owandell scares me,” Tessa replied.

“He’ll hurt you again over my dead body,” Honor promised.

“That doesn’t comfort me,” Tessa said. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“Trust your power,” Cole said. “It helped save us in the echolands.”

“Knowing we should talk to Owandell doesn’t necessarily spare us from harm,” Honor said. “Terrible consequences could follow. Destiny’s prophecy could simply mean that any efforts to escape would fail. Or it could mean the encounter with Owandell will produce outcomes that need to happen for some higher purpose. But serving a higher purpose is no guarantee of safety.”

“You’re not very comforting,” Cole said.

“Does our situation seem comfortable?” Honor challenged. “We all need to face reality.”

“What do you think they did with Desmond?” Tessa asked.

“He wasn’t a high enough priority to transfer him to Junction,” Honor said. “Hopefully, he’s just imprisoned back near the Temple of the Robust Sky.”

“What is our reality?” Cole asked. “Does Owandell want your powers again?”

“Perhaps,” Honor said. “Or else he wants us as hostages.”

“Can he take your powers?” Cole asked.

“He proved he has the ability,” Honor said. “We didn’t surrender them willingly the first time.”

“Is your father behind this?” Cole wondered. Assisted by Owandell, the High King had used shapecraft to steal the powers of his five daughters several decades ago. The absence of their shaping abilities had stopped the princesses from aging. Miracle, Honor, Constance, and Destiny all had their powers back now. Only their eldest sister, Elegance, still lacked her stolen abilities.

“Hard to say,” Honor said. “Though Owandell still works for Father, he doesn’t collaborate closely with him anymore, and is clearly carrying out his own schemes with Ramarro. We won’t know how much Father is involved until this unfolds.”

Cole frowned at the mention of Ramarro. Under the name Nazeem, the torivor had introduced shapecraft into the five kingdoms. Ramarro had just escaped his prison in the echolands, but with help from Cole, the torivor had been diverted to a prison in Creon when he reentered mortality.

“Owandell stole our powers for Father in the first place,” Honor said. “I expect Owandell will want to take them again. But I’m not going to resist Destiny’s foresight. When she speaks under the influence of her gift, I have never known her to be wrong.”

“How many of the Enforcers are loyal to your father?” Cole asked. “Could they be taking us to him?”

“Owandell has recently proven that he controls the majority of the Enforcers,” Honor said. “I’m sure there are some exceptions.”

“Where do we go if we escape him?” Cole asked.

“In the capital?” Honor asked. “We try to find Mother.”

Cole had met Harmony. She had helped him escape Junction the last time he visited. “Do you think she can help us find Mira?” Cole wondered.

“Probably,” Honor said. “I hope Mother can also direct us to Elegance. Our highest priority is to stop Ramarro, and we’ll need help from Wayminders. Mother has contacts in that community.”

Cole felt smothered by more than the hood covering his face. There was so much to be done! The prison where he had helped deposit Ramarro would not hold the torivor forever. It might only restrain him for weeks. Or even days.

And if the torivor got free, the Outskirts would fall under his complete control. Not to mention that the torivor wanted revenge against Cole and his friends. The ancient shapers who had created the Outskirts had barely managed to contain Ramarro, and nobody was left who could defeat him. Cole had to find a way to prevent his escape.

And he needed to find his friends, especially Mira, Jace, and Dalton. And his brother, Hunter.

And he needed to rescue Jenna and the other kids who had been kidnapped into the Outskirts from his neighborhood in Arizona.

And he needed to restore Elegance's power and defeat the High King.

And he was currently tied up in a prison wagon.

And his power didn't work right anymore.

"Let's survive Owandell first," Cole said.

"He's a powerful shapemaker," Honor warned. "He can block the shaping of others. And we know with enough time he can strip away their powers and give them to another."

Cole temporarily wished he could return to the echolands, where he had gained so much power. Nobody in the echolands could chain him up and cart him around. Of course, it was also the last stop before moving on to the next phase of existence. Most people in the echolands were dead.

Cole was back in the living world, and he had to solve his problems here. Or at least try.

"I guess we just have to be patient for now," Cole concluded.

"Save your strength," Honor suggested. "We'll need it before long."

## CHAPTER

# 2

## OWANDELL

As the journey wore on, Cole had few options to improve his comfort. He rotated between lying on his stomach, his right side, his left side, and his back. He could not endure resting on his back for long because, with his wrists bound behind him, the position placed too much pressure on his arms. He tried sitting or kneeling from time to time, but that never felt very comfortable.

Cole tried to picture his home.

He had visited a realistic dream version of his room shortly before meeting She Who Stands at the Summit in the echolands. Some of those details still felt pretty fresh.

But riding his bike down his street? Eating breakfast at the kitchen table? A typical day of school? Those memories seemed like remote visions of another life.

A life far from prison wagons, and spiritual realms, and advanced robots, and magical powers. Far from exiled princesses and life-or-death combat.

Would he ever make it home?

Would he see his parents again? His sister?

Would he go to bed without wondering if enemies would capture him while he slept? Or kill him?

Maybe.

If he could survive this current predicament.

There had to be a chance. If Owandell simply wanted him dead, that would have happened while his spirit was in the echolands.

If Cole survived this, then he could work on the next problem.

And the next one.

He had survived a lot. Maybe he could keep on surviving.

One day at a time.

One crisis at a time.

But maybe at some point he wouldn't survive.

Would that be so bad? He had seen there was life after death. He knew something about where he would end up.

And he had heard the call of the Other—the realm beyond the echolands. The call had been inviting.

Someday he would answer that call.

Hopefully not today. Or tomorrow. Or anytime soon.

He had too much to do.

How long had their unanimated bodies traveled in the wagon before he, Honor, and Tessa returned from the echolands? How many times had the teams been changed?

The road seemed smoother, the hoofbeats crisper. The wagon barely rattled.

The road must be paved. Or something similar.

“Are we nearing the capital?” Cole asked.

“We're in Junction,” Honor replied. “I felt my powers go active half an hour ago.”

“Mine faded a little as we left Necronum,” Tessa said.

“Mine feel the same,” Cole said.

He tried to will the cords on his wrists to dissolve. Nothing happened. He could sense his power, but he couldn't push it into the physical objects around him. Doing so had felt perfectly natural in the echolands!

Before long the wagon slowed and rounded a corner. The pace remained slow, and turning became frequent, until the wagon descended a short, steep incline, leveled out, and stopped.

Chains clinked at the rear of the wagon. Then the doors opened.

“On your feet,” the gruff voice ordered.

Staying limp, Cole held still. He heard no sound from the princesses.

“Come off it,” the voice said. “I heard you gabbing off and on for the past twenty miles. On your feet unless you want to be dragged.”

Cole heard the princesses stirring, so he stood up as well. It took some extra effort without the use of his hands. He wondered how much the man had heard. They hadn't spoken loudly, the wagon was enclosed, and the horses made noise. Hopefully, the driver had just caught an occasional murmur of conversation.

What if the driver had heard everything? Had they expressed anything compromising?

Cole heard someone approach. An iron collar clamped around his neck, fitting over the hood and drawing the cloth tighter against his face. Cole tried to keep his breathing calm. Air seemed to pass through the material well enough.

Near his feet, a key clicked inside a lock, and a manacle unfastened from one ankle. Then the other was removed. At least that was a relief.

Cole was suddenly tugged forward by the collar. It guided him forward, sideways, and then to a stop, suggesting that the collar was connected to a pole rather than a rope. Cole felt helplessly angry. Did they have to treat him like an animal? Were they afraid he would bite?

“Drop to the ground,” a hard voice commanded.

Probing ahead with his foot, Cole felt nothing but empty air. He must have been at the back of the wagon, and they wanted him to jump down. His inability to see made the prospect uncomfortable.

The opportunity to choose was taken from him as he was yanked forward by his collar. Hands bound behind his back, unable to gauge the arrival of the ground, Cole fell for an alarming moment and then stumbled upon impact. The collar pressed up against the underside of his jaw, stretching his neck as it kept him on his feet.

Cole didn't hear anyone ordering the princesses to jump, so he assumed they were helped down more gently. Did they have collars too? Until now, Cole had been too distracted by what his captors were doing to him to heed any clues about Honor and Tessa.

The unrelenting collar pulled him forward. Others walked nearby. Cole stamped his feet. The level ground and the acoustics of his footfalls made him suspect he was in a room rather than outside.

He halted as murmured words were exchanged. A door opened.

“Honor?” Cole tried.

“Silence,” a harsh voice demanded. Whoever held the pole attached to his collar gave it a jolting shake.

“We're here,” Honor answered from not far behind him.

“No more words or I start really hurting the boy,” the harsh voice threatened.

For a moment Cole forgot the plan to go quietly. He could feel his power inside. Using his anger and frustration to sharpen his focus, he tried to push his power into the collar around his neck. In the echolands, when engaging his power, he could feel the target object without touching it. Here, though he

could feel the weight of the collar around his neck, he could not touch it with his power.

He was tugged forward again. Cole walked in brooding silence.

He passed through another door. And another.

Then he was brought to a stop. "Wait here," the harsh voice demanded. "Don't move."

Whoever held the pole connected to his collar set it down.

Footsteps retreated. A door closed.

Cole waited. He could see nothing.

"Honor?" Tessa asked. "Cole?"

"Yes," Cole said.

"Here," Honor said.

"Anyone else?" Tessa tried.

There came no reply.

"Where are we?" Tessa asked.

"Underground," Honor replied. "The bowels of some building. Maybe Hakrel's Castle."

"Where?" Cole asked.

"Headquarters for the Enforcers," Honor replied. "Don't assume we're alone just because nobody answered."

"Indeed," a confident voice replied.

The unexpected male voice startled Cole.

"Owandell," Honor said.

"Good memory," Owandell replied. "Guards, remove the hoods."

Fingers tugged the bottom of Cole's hood out from the iron collar and then removed the coarse covering. He blinked beneath the glare of multiple lanterns. The windowless room was made of mortared stone. Honor and Tessa stood off to one side. They wore no collars, and their hands were free.

Owandell paced before them, hands behind his back, wearing a brown robe, shoulders stooped. His hairless head and fleshy features looked much as Cole remembered them from the ceremony at the Founding Stone beneath the First Castle.

"You guards are dismissed," Owandell said. "Please stay alert."

Looking over his shoulder, Cole saw four guards dressed as Enforcers exit the room. The far end of the pole attached to his collar rested on the floor, as if to prop him up.

“Does our father know we’re here?” Honor asked once the door had closed.

Owandell shrugged. “Difficult to be sure. Stafford has many spies. I have not informed him, if that is what you mean. The High King is a scant shadow of the leader he once was. I withhold much from him, for the good of the kingdoms.”

“What do you want with us?” Honor asked.

Owandell stopped pacing and smiled. “Is this how it works? Are you conducting an interrogation?”

“You abducted us,” Honor said evenly. “I want to know why.”

“How authoritative of you,” Owandell said. “How absolutely royal. Do you grasp that you are my prisoner? Do you understand that your monarchy is at an end?”

“I understand that you work for my father,” Honor said.

Owandell scrunched one eye and looked upward with the other. “In theory, perhaps. According to certain documents, I owe him my allegiance. Ceremonial vows were made. In practice it has been some time since anyone of consequence took Stafford Pemberton seriously.”

“This castle, this city, and the five kingdoms all belong to him,” Honor said.

“Officially, yes, for the moment,” Owandell said, pacing again. “I despise empty words. Listen. You two princesses currently have political value, but not for much longer. All conventional metrics will soon be outdated. The deck will be reshuffled. Serving boys and milkmaids might outrank kings and queens. All that will matter before long is where you stand with Nazeem.”

“You mean Ramarro?” Cole asked.

“Very few know that name in connection with Nazeem,” Owandell said quietly. “None who do dare utter it.”

“Ramarro?” Cole repeated, happy to bother him.

Owandell gave a very brittle smile. “I’m aware you interacted with my master shortly before he departed the echolands. It is part of the reason I wished to consult with you three. That and the novelty of your shaping powers. Your power looks different, Cole. Much more serviceable than when we last met. I take it the echolands agreed with you?”

“I learned a few things,” Cole said vaguely.

The smile changed to a baring of teeth. “Hearken to my words, boy. The order of the world is changing. Many will suffer. Many will perish. An elect few will rise. Above most others I have encountered, your power could be of interest to Nazeem.”



“It was,” Cole said. “Ramarro tried to recruit me.”

Owandell drew near him. “You resisted?”

“Good guess,” Cole said.

“You are an alien in a dangerous land,” Owandell said. “Do you comprehend that his generosity is your only hope?”

“I’m going to stop him,” Cole said. “You should help us.”

Owandell chuckled. “Do you realize who you’re talking to?”

“Do you get who you serve?” Cole challenged. “You’ll be a slave.”

Owandell grinned. “Even if that were true, Nazeem’s slaves will possess more power than kings. He can effectuate shaping potential that exceeds our greediest fantasies.”

“And he’ll use it to control everyone,” Cole said. “You’ll be at his mercy. And he is not merciful. Surrendering to Ramarro is not winning.”

“Young,” Owandell spat. “Naive. Foolhardy.” He turned to the princesses. “There is no sense in resisting the inevitable. No sense in demanding certain destruction. Your shaping power could interest my master as well.”

“Do you want us to join you?” Honor asked bitterly. “To trust you? You took our powers! You destroyed our family.”

“We’ve met Ramarro,” Tessa said. “We won’t be joining you.”

Owandell smiled. “I feel you trying to engage your power, Honor. Not in my presence, my dear. I could shut down ten of you, especially here in Junction. Doesn’t come as easily as in Elloweer, does it?”

Eyes intent, sweat beading on her brow, Honor grunted in reply.

Owandell shifted his attention to Tessa. “I can even block your squirmy ability. No cryptic babblings will issue forth in my presence.”

His gaze moved on to Cole and showed a flicker of concern. “And you . . . are most unusual.”

“Let us go,” Cole said. “If you won’t help us, just let us go. Wouldn’t it be better if we stopped Ramarro? Even if it’s a long shot?”

Owandell shook his head. “My master is no longer in the echolands. He has already returned.”

“Then where is he?” Cole asked.

Owandell narrowed his eyes. “Something interfered. Perhaps some ancient fail-safe built into his prison.”

“Maybe it was me,” Cole said.

“Impossible,” Owandell whispered.

“Then he must have arrived without any problem,” Cole said. “Where is he?”

Owandell brought his face right up to Cole’s. “What happened? Where is Nazeem?”

“I sent him home to the magical land of the torivors,” Cole said.

Real anger flared in Owandell’s eyes. “I know that isn’t so. It would take an unimaginable amount of power for a torivor to escape this realm. Start speaking truth. Where is Nazeem?”

“Don’t explain,” Honor cautioned.

“I know,” Cole said.

Owandell inched closer, furious eyes unblinking, warm breath unpleasant, until his nose almost touched Cole’s. “You will tell me, boy. Or I’ll leave your power twice as mangled as it was before.”

The threat rattled Cole. He had barely healed his power in the echolands, and the ordeal had stretched him to his limits. With all the troubles ahead, the last thing he wanted was to lose his power again.

But he couldn’t lead Owandell to his master. Cole knew some details of the imprisonment. The vault was called the Void, where Ramarro currently floated at the center of a vast, empty space, reliving the same looping millisecond, unable to move, and drawn back to the center if he did. The torivor had been deposited there with help from the consciousness of Dandalus imprinted on the Founding Stone.

Cole knew the Void was in Creon but had no idea where exactly. And he knew the prison, strong as it was, would probably not hold Ramarro very long. If Owandell found Ramarro, the escape would almost certainly come more speedily.

“Ramarro couldn’t take me down,” Cole said. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Owandell huffed incredulously. “Nazeem had his considerable powers focused on returning from the afterlife—a nearly impossible feat. You encountered him at a rare moment of vulnerability and proved an inconvenience.”

“And I’ll do it again,” Cole said. “You should help.”

“Last warning,” Owandell said. “Explain what happened. I know Nazeem crossed over. Tell me where he is.”

“Never,” Cole said.

Owandell backed up a step, glancing at the princesses.

“You know what I’m about to do to him,” Owandell threatened. “Tell me

what I want to know.”

“We have no idea,” Honor said. “Cole doesn’t either. He had help diverting Ramarro.”

“I believe that,” Owandell said. “But the boy knows more than he is telling. Very well.” Standing before Cole, Owandell seized his shoulders.

Suddenly Cole could sense Owandell’s power, roiling and dark, tainted but mighty. That corrupt power surged at Cole, sliding across the surface of the energy inside him. Gritting his teeth, Cole pushed Owandell’s power away.

And Owandell staggered, landing flat on his back. Round eyes stared up in shock and dismay.

Cole felt a flash of similar surprise at how naturally it had come to him, then smiled. It felt good to access his power and feel a reaction. He could still perceive Owandell’s power but could no longer connect to it.

Honor laughed. “You’re out of your depth, little man.”

Without a response, still looking startled, Owandell got to his feet, absently brushing at his robe. His gaze shifted between Honor and Cole.

A knock came at the door.

“All is well,” Owandell snapped. “Give us time.”

The knock was repeated more insistently.

“Give us time!” Owandell shouted.

A key jiggled in the lock, and the door opened. An Enforcer poked his head inside. “Begging your pardon, we’re under attack,” the guard said.

“Attack?” Owandell asked, bewildered.

“The royal guard,” the Enforcer said. “The legionnaires. The Junction City Militia. Royalist Enforcers. We’re being overwhelmed. Commander Ratcleff gave the evacuation order.”

Owandell stroked his chin. “Stafford sent his forces against us. The old goat is finally making a move. After all this time, I honestly didn’t believe he had it in him.”

“A decisive move,” the guard said. “Quick. Unexpected. They had help from the inside. The upper levels have already fallen. We can still get you out, but we have to go.”

Owandell started laughing.

“Is everything all right?” the guard asked.

“I’m sorry,” Owandell said, waving away the comment. “The king has no idea what is coming. He is playing politics while the sky is falling. He is fretting

about pests in his garden when the volcano next door is about to erupt.”

Cole edged over toward Honor. They needed to escape, and the contact with Owandell had given him an idea. Neither Owandell nor the guard seemed to notice his movement.

“Be that as it may,” the guard said, “the king is successfully taking Hakrel’s Castle. We must away or surrender.”

“Commander Ratcleff had it right,” Owandell said. “This castle is meaningless. Cole, you and your peculiar powers? Pointless! You princesses? Irrelevant! Nazeem is coming. All unrelated currency will soon be worthless.”

“And yet the castle is falling,” the guard reminded everyone. “Leave the prisoners?”

“No,” Owandell said. “They won’t get off that easily. And I will not hand Stafford that minor victory. Bring the prisoners.”

The guard fully opened the door, and three other Enforcers tromped in.

Cole closed the last of the distance between himself and Honor, twisting so he could touch her hand with his hands tied behind his back. He immediately sensed her power, steady and strong. More important, as he had hoped, his own power connected easily to hers. It felt natural and simple, like it had in the echolands.

He could also sense power from Owandell shrouding the energy inside her like a dark, filmy cocoon. Clenching his jaw, Cole used his power to feed energy into hers. Her energy blazed brilliantly, and Owandell’s cocoon evaporated.

With a roar, Honor expanded into a huge, shaggy bear, at least three or four feet taller than Cole. Lunging forward, she clamped her fierce jaws down on the shoulder of the nearest guard. She shook him brutally, making his limbs flop, then heaved him off to one side, where he slammed against the wall and dropped to the floor in a savaged heap.

The bulk of the bear made the room seem much smaller. Cole and Tessa fell back behind her. Though Cole was no longer touching Honor, the connection to her power remained, and he kept feeding her energy.

The Enforcer nearest Honor assumed a fighting stance. Thornlike spikes sprouted from his armor, and his sword elongated into a spear. The Enforcers who Cole had encountered usually had shaping powers. This guy was no exception.

The other two guards ushered Owandell toward the door.

“No,” Owandell griped. “Not without the prisoners.”

“We have no time for a fight,” the guard who had first poked his head in cried. “The king’s men will be upon us shortly.”

The spiky guard lunged forward with his spear. Honor batted the spearhead aside and raked him with her claws. The guard went down, and Honor pounced, wounding her forelegs on his spikes as she tore his armor apart.

The other two guards ushered Owandell out of the room. The door banged shut, and a lock immediately clicked.

Roaring, Honor charged the door, blubber and muscles in motion beneath her golden brown coat. She swatted the door and leaned her bulk against it. She snarled and slashed with her claws. The door held against her assault.

Backing away a pace or two, she faced the door and sat down. The two guards she had mauled lay still.

Owandell did not return.

## CHAPTER

# 3

## A RADIANT DEED

**H**onor had changed back to her human shape by the time the legionnaires encountered them. The smartly uniformed soldiers appeared astonished by the discovery. They abandoned the room once they realized who they had found. When a higher-ranking officer returned, he had Honor and Destiny put on brown robes with cowls.

Cole got the same claustrophobic hood back over his head and was led out of the room by the same iron collar. He proceeded along a winding route to a wagon that carted him away. When he tried to strike up a conversation, Cole found he was alone. He tried to sense Honor's power, only to find that whatever connection he had established no longer remained.

They had survived Owandell for now. Might Stafford be worse? Cole had met the High King before. At the time, Cole was posing as an errand boy. Would the High King remember him? Would Cole even get an audience with him? What would be the fate of the mysterious kid discovered alongside two of the lost princesses?

Execution seemed like a realistic possibility.

After the wagon stopped, Cole was taken on another excursion. He could tell he was indoors once again. The air eventually grew cooler, damper, smelling of stone and rot. He descended many steps. Several doors opened and closed. He was finally unhooded by a surly guard inside a dank cell. The pole was detached from his iron collar, and a chain was threaded through his collar and locked to the wall.

When the guard closed the cell door, the torchlight departed with him. The cell was almost too small for Cole to lie down. He thought he remembered seeing a little hole in the corner for relieving himself. The chain seemed just long enough to let him reach it.

Cole was sad to lose the company of the princesses. He hoped they had better accommodations than he did. He wondered if their father would try to take their powers again. Could he do that without Owandell?

Sighing, Cole sat down. The stone felt uncomfortably cold, even through his clothes. Being locked in a dungeon seemed like an appropriate symbol of total failure. Could he sink lower than this? Maybe a torture chamber. Or a coffin.

The longer Cole sat, the more he began to appreciate the quiet and the darkness. One thing about languishing in a dungeon—it put your other responsibilities on hold. He tried to push his power into the collar again, and into the chain that attached him to the wall, but to no avail. He had felt strong connections with Owandell’s power and Honor’s power, but everything else remained unreachable.

Cole discovered some relief in the lack of responsibility. If Ramarro got free in the near future, Cole could do nothing about it from prison. He thought about Jenna at the Temple of the Still Water, awaiting rescue. He pictured Jace, Joe, and Mira, back in their physical bodies somewhere in Necronum. He wondered about Dalton and Hunter, who had avoided getting drawn into the echolands. All were most likely facing their own troubles.

And there was nothing Cole could do.

It might be up to his friends to rescue him this time. The iron collar, the chain, and the locked cell door meant he wasn’t going anywhere for a while.

Leaning against the chilly wall, Cole fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Cole awoke when his cell door opened. A pair of guardsmen stepped inside, taking up most of the remaining space. One held a torch.

“On your feet,” one of the guards ordered gruffly.

“Yeah, okay,” Cole said, trying to fully awaken.

The guards leaned close, looking at the collar. He held a tiny key. “I don’t see where to put this,” he said.

The torchbearer stepped nearer, squinting. “The jailer could have been more specific.”

“The chain is just looped through my collar,” Cole offered. “I think the lock is on the wall.”

The guards studied where the chain was affixed to the wall, undid a lock, and slid the chain from Cole's collar. The guard with the torch stepped out into the hall. The other motioned for Cole to follow.

The guard without a torch slid a hood over Cole's head.

"Really?" Cole asked. "Isn't it dark enough?"

"You're a top-priority prisoner," the guard said. "We're escorting you to a high-ranking official. We'll be using some secret corridors. We have to keep the way secret."

The guard took Cole's arm and led him forward. The guard did a good job warning Cole about upcoming obstacles and steps. For a long time they headed upward. Cole heard a couple of quick interactions with jailers. Then he sensed brighter light seeping through his hood. They walked for a time before it became dark again. More stairs. Endless stairs. Then several twists and turns and doorways.

When the hood was finally removed, Cole stood in a spacious, opulent bedchamber. The huge four-poster bed had a canopy and velvet covers. Through the parted curtains, Cole beheld an aged man propped up on pillows, his complexion an unhealthy gray. Upon recognizing Cole, the man's expression sharpened with sudden interest. "You."

Though they had met not too long ago, it took Cole a moment to recognize the man in the bed as Stafford Pemberton. With less hair, deeper wrinkles, slighter shoulders, and looser skin, the High King looked at least twenty years older.

"Hello, Your Majesty," Cole said.

The king's eyes darted to the guards. "Thank you. I require a private audience." He might be old and sick, but he seemed alert.

The guards immediately departed.

A lone guard remained in a corner of the room, holding a crossbow. He was not one of the guards who had brought Cole from the cell.

"No funny business," Stafford warned. "Or Tuteo will put a quarrel in you. He is deaf and mute, and thus the perfect escort for private conferences." Stafford began coughing, small at first, then louder and longer and wetter. As the fit wound down, he wiped his lips with a handkerchief. "Come closer. I cannot afford to shout."

Cole approached the bed.

Stafford studied him. "I remember you. The errand boy. Rod, was it? What



subterfuge is this? Why were you being held by Owandell with two of my daughters?”

“I’ve been helping them,” Cole said. “Protecting them. My real name is Cole.”

Stafford coughed again, eyes shut, chest heaving. He spat into his handkerchief and opened his eyes. “I am weary of the many schemers seeking personal advantage through my offspring. The Unseen want to justify a revolution. Owandell wants a coup. The hour has come to—” He became lost in another fit of coughing.

Cole listened uncomfortably to the wet hacking.

Stafford wiped his lips again and took several shallow breaths. “The hour has come to take action. I have remained dormant too long as my foes plot my demise. You are a member of the Unseen?”

“Not a member,” Cole said. “I’m just helping your daughters.”

“You misrepresented yourself, Cole. You offered a false name. To my face. Lying to the king is punishable by death. Why should I refrain from enforcing this law?”

“Because a radiant deed shines forever,” Cole said.

Stafford paled, his eyes widening. “Impossible. Where did you learn that phrase?”

“You told it to me,” Cole said.

Stafford’s eyes hardened. “My father spoke that phrase to a handful of people. All are long in their graves. Over my lifetime, I have uttered the phrase to three persons. None of them were you. And you would have been born long after the last of them died.”

“You told me in the Cave of Memory,” Cole said.

Stafford covered his mouth with a hand that was all tendons, wrinkles, and liver spots. “Intriguing. Plausible. An imprint of me resides there. An imprint left years ago. A secret portion of my history. A younger self, but me, and mentally sound. In some ways more than I am now. My imprint shared the phrase?”

“You told me it could bring a reward,” Cole said.

“I must have trusted and appreciated you immensely,” Stafford said. “Baffling. Unexpected. My daughters vouched for you. They warned that I needed to treat you kindly. Honor spoke of a rising threat, one only reported to me as a rumor so far. Nazeem. And a new name: Ramarro. The master who taught Owandell shapecraft.”

“I met Ramarro,” Cole said. “In the echolands. I tried to keep him in prison. He got free. I slowed his return, but not permanently.”

“Honor shared similar . . . shared similar . . .” Stafford turned away and began coughing again, frail shoulders heaving. He hawked up phlegm and spat into a handkerchief. “She expressed similar concerns.” His eyes looked watery. “Could you pass me the tonic on my nightstand?”

A single stoppered vial rested on the bedside table. Cole handed it to the king. Stafford unstopped it, sniffed the contents, and winced. “Vile stuff. Meant to scare the sickness away, I suppose.” He took a long sip, swished it around his mouth, then swallowed. A sour grimace followed.

“Nasty?” Cole asked.

“Dreadful concoction,” Stafford said. “I should lend it to my interrogators. They’d have every secret out in no time. It eases the coughing, but the royal stomach and bowels pay a price. I was saying?”

“Honor had similar concerns,” Cole reminded him.

“A torivor of legend about to commence a reign of terror with the help of Owandell,” Stafford said. “Frankly it sounds absurd. Like fairy tales invented to frighten children. Or perhaps propaganda devised by Owandell to inspire awe.” He handed the vial to Cole, who replaced it on the nightstand. “You saw this torivor?”

“Honor did too,” Cole said. “And others. In the echolands. He’s real. Send spies to the echolands. Lots of people there know about Nazeem.”

“You believe you can stop this torivor?” Stafford asked.

“Somebody has to,” Cole said.

“Indeed,” Stafford said. “When you met me in the Cave of Memory, I take it you liked me?”

“Yes,” Cole said.

“What did you do for me? Why did I share the phrase with you? I intended to be supremely cautious as an imprint.”

“The imprints can’t hold new memories,” Cole said. “Your imprint only recalled what he knew up until you left the cave.”

“I’m aware how imprints function,” Stafford said.

“I used rocks to spell out that you end up with Harmony,” Cole said. “So the imprint could remember.”

Tears filled Stafford’s eyes. One took a crooked path down his wrinkled cheek. “I see. Clever boy. You found a weak spot. Yes, at the time, that would

have meant everything to me. Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why the act of kindness? You have been protecting my daughters. You must have unfavorable feelings about me."

"You could say that."

"Then why?"

Cole thought for a moment. "I liked the Stafford I met in the cave. He seemed like a good person."

Stafford shifted against his pillows. He coughed gently. "He was, Cole," he whispered. "I was." He stared at Cole uncertainly. "Would you believe that man is still inside me somewhere? Would you?"

Cole shrugged. "I guess he has to be, right?"

Stafford looked away. "I don't know either, sometimes."

"I'm sorry," Cole said.

"I'm dying, Cole. You can see that."

"You look a lot older than the last time we met."

"The powers I borrowed prolonged my life," Stafford said. He cleared his throat. "The shaping powers I stole from my own flesh and blood. They prolonged a certain youthfulness. As I lost my hold on those powers, the stolen years began to catch up with me. The aging accelerated the more power I lost. Now I only retain a small portion of Elegance's power. I don't know whether I will hang on until it departs. I have tried to keep my waning health a secret. My rule has grown unstable enough without my enemies knowing I am bedridden."

"Have you had success?" Cole asked.

"Probably not," Stafford said. "I had eleven spies executed this year. Spies caught right here in the First Castle. If you catch eleven rats, how many more are still in the walls, raiding the pantry?"

"Maybe a lot," Cole said.

"I've lost spies too," Stafford said. "This year, no less than thirty, right here in Junction City. The majority taken by Owandell, no doubt. Hard to be sure. He is crafty. Cole, I am High King of the five kingdoms, I am dying, and there is not a single person I fully trust."

Cole winced. "That sounds terrible."

"And along you come with your radiant deed."

Cole said nothing.

"You witnessed me as I was, Cole," Stafford said softly. "I never meant to

become who I am. I went on from that cave to win Harmony. And it was wonderful. And so intimidating. Children were born. All the unrest and problems and strife of five kingdoms and one capital flowed to my doorway. If you ever want to ensure your worst enemy never again enjoys a good night's rest, make him a king. I was daunted, Cole. Overwhelmed. I was not up to the challenge. Owandell offered critical support."

Cole nodded to show he was listening.

"Owandell gradually moved from the background of my life to the forefront," Stafford continued. "Under his guidance I made the necessary connections to win Harmony. When the crown came to me younger than anyone expected, he quietly became my right hand. He reduced my burdens. He fixed problems great and small. He showed no interest in acclaim. I came to rely on him as I had never relied on anyone. And then, as my five daughters grew, and their abilities flourished, one day he made a suggestion."

"Take their powers," Cole said.

"Borrow them," Stafford clarified. "The word was always 'borrow.' I had no idea borrowing shaping power was possible. Owandell assured me it could be done. Just for enough time to firmly establish my rule. To provide Harmony the strong husband she deserved. To grant my daughters the protection they needed. To give my subjects a monarch worth heeding. So many selfless reasons to commit a supremely selfish act." Stafford shook his head. "I was struggling to lead Grand Shapers and councillors and other governors who were so much more powerful than me. I was insufficient. I had married into much more than I merited. Owandell offered a chance to become the man I should have been."

"And you took it."

Stafford gave a small nod. "And that marked the end of the man you met in the cave."

Cole stared at Stafford solemnly.

"I did not know I would lose my daughters instead of protect them," Stafford said. "I did not expect to destroy the trust of my wife. And . . . I never anticipated how much I would adore the power."

"Wow," Cole said, surprised by the candor.

"I have lived many years," Stafford said. "I consolidated power as no other ruler of the Outskirts has done before. And . . . I lost my way. I see it now, as I wane. It's like awakening from a delirium. I lost my way, Cole."

Cole gave a nod.

“A king, even a High King, even a High King with astonishing powers, is just a man. Only a man. Subject to weaknesses and foolishness. He longs for the same basics any man longs for. He suffers from many of the same insecurities that torment other men. A king has resources, yes, and those resources can quench certain longings, but they can also be used to hide frailties. Those resources can conceal flaws. They can prevent certain wounds from being tended and healed. They can . . . Look at me! I’m rambling!”

“It makes sense,” Cole said. “It’s so sad.”

Stafford harrumphed. “I’m not looking for sympathy. I lived large, Cole. I threw an enormous shadow. Few ever lived larger. Whether feared or loved, my name was known in every corner of the land. My voice was heard. My presence was felt. None of the five kingdoms would be the same without me.” Stafford sniffed. “No man lives up to his ideals. No man. Not if he reflects deeply and honestly. We all have our failings. I lived very large, Cole. My failings were magnified. They became enormous.”

Cole didn’t know how to respond.

“The bitter truth? The starkest reality? If I could redo it all . . . I would have never taken their powers. I long to pretend it was worth it. I wish I could claim it was difficult but necessary—a brutal obligation of governance. The truth is I understood too late what my decision really meant. I would have rather been a mediocre king and a good husband, a good father. But I cannot go back. And I cannot repair what has been lost. Despite my regrets, when I felt the power leaving, I fought to keep it. Fought hard, Cole. It was torture to feel the power slipping away. The damage to my relationships had been done. And so I wanted to at least enjoy the spoils of my folly. They were all I had left.”

“Maybe you can still help your family,” Cole said.

“I never wished them harm,” Stafford said. “Through my darkest hours, my love remained constant. I realize that my actions shout louder than any words I can pronounce, but I never wished them harm. Not Harmony. Not my girls. They ever remained part of my calculations. I would help them now, if I could. Unfortunately, in this hour of gravest need, my capacity dwindles.”

“Ramarro is real,” Cole said. “He is coming. You command a lot of people.”

“I’ve engaged my forces,” Stafford said. “I turned Owandell into a fugitive to take my daughters from him. I know he is no longer my ally. I’ve known for years. I was not sure I could survive a war with him, even with my full powers. Now our precarious stalemate is broken. He will try to make me pay.”

“Owandell is focused on his master,” Cole said.

Stafford coughed softly. He sat up a little straighter. “You are more than I expected you to be, my boy. And I owe you a favor. Ask. You have the High King’s attention.”

“Where are Honor and—”

“Leave my daughters out of it,” Stafford interrupted. “They are quite safe. Including from me. I have neither the ability nor the inclination to disturb their powers again. And I will not have them drawn into more danger, regardless of their protests. Leave my daughters out of it and request your favor. I have many resources at my disposal. I have no objection to you pursuing the issue of Ramarro.”

“I came here from Outside,” Cole said. “A place called Arizona.”

“The latest group?” Stafford asked. “Did Ansel bring you?”

“He brought a lot of my friends,” Cole said. “I slipped through to help them and got caught too. I’d like to find my friends.”

The king frowned thoughtfully. “I do not know the locations of those slaves. None were powerful enough to be of serious interest to me. I have no objection to you finding them. The slaver Ansel would know. I received a report on Ansel. We had him in custody for a time. He has returned to Five Roads. I believe he is organizing another slaving excursion. Would you like to visit with him?”

It made Cole sick to hear about another slaving excursion—another batch of innocent kids would be ripped from their homes and forgotten by their loved ones. And for Stafford it was just business as usual. Cole did not understand how anyone could permit slavery. And it was utterly incomprehensible to think of how a leader could let kidnapped children serve as the supply. But this was not the moment to fight this battle. “I can’t go to him yet,” Cole said. “I need to stop Ramarro first.”

“Then what is your request?”

“You don’t fully trust anyone who works for you,” Cole said.

Stafford frowned, wrinkles sagging farther. “I do not.”

“Will you free me?” Cole asked. “Let me go to Harmony for help?”

Closing his eyes, Stafford took a couple of measured breaths. “Yes.” One eye opened. “And I will do better than that. I will make you my personal agent and give you my royal seal. You will outrank any general you meet. For as long as I wear the crown, you will speak with my voice, command with my authority. I will cover any expenses you incur. How does that suit you?”

“I can hardly believe it,” Cole said honestly.

“Don’t be too grateful,” Stafford said. “You will be swimming in dangerous waters. Starting now, you are one of the few people I doubt will outlive me. Please prove me wrong.”

“I’ll do my best.”

## CHAPTER

# 4

## VIOLET

Cole entered Harmony's private chambers clothed like a young lord. After assembling his outfit, a small team of servants had only let him dress himself at his insistence. Eight guards had escorted him to Harmony's tower, and then the same old woman he recalled from a prior visit had admitted him to her chamber.

The queen looked much as he remembered, tall and graceful, with some streaks of white in her auburn hair and a few worry lines on her lovely face. Hints of darkness under her eyes and a few stray hairs made her appear a little more tired than he had seen her. She looked Cole up and down suspiciously.

"I see you are wearing the king's seal," Harmony said. "Are you the most fantastic spy of all time? Have you changed sides?"

"The sides are shifting," Cole said, fingering the medallion on his chest. "The High King knows I've been protecting your daughters. And he knows that won't change."

"I am happy to see you are well," Harmony said. "What news of my children?"

Cole explained that as far as he knew, Constance was safe back in Zeropolis. He told how Mira, Honor, and Destiny had all made it out of the echolands. Then he related some details about the fight with Ramarro and how he, Honor, and Destiny were captured by Owandell.

"That clarifies why Stafford sent his forces against Hakrel's Castle," Harmony said. "I wondered if he had finally lost all reason. But to retrieve Honor and Destiny . . . it makes sense. Do you know where Mira went after the echolands?"

"Back to Necronum somewhere," Cole said. "She was with some of our other friends. At least she's not alone."



“And you are certain this Nazeem is actually a torivor?” Harmony asked. “Like Trillian?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “And incredibly powerful.” Only two torivors had ever come to the Outskirts. Trillian was imprisoned in Elloweer within the Lost Palace. And Ramarro had been trapped in the echolands. “I had help diverting Ramarro into another prison, but it probably won’t hold him for long. We have to find another way to stop him. Owandell is convinced that when Ramarro arrives, the torivor will easily conquer the five kingdoms.”

Harmony sighed and covered her eyes with one manicured hand. “If torivors live up to their reputation, I expect he’s right. This keeps spiraling from bad to worse. First I was primarily protecting my girls from Stafford. Then Owandell loomed larger, and civil war became a serious possibility. And now . . . an unthinkable evil from the darkest annals of our history threatens not only my family but the lives of everyone we govern.”

“Ramarro was behind so much of the rest,” Cole said. “Ramarro trained Owandell, who then recruited your husband. Ramarro taught Owandell how to steal the shaping power. Without Owandell, your daughters would never have lost their abilities.”

“Stafford has Honor and Destiny?” Harmony asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “He refused to free them, but promised to keep them safe.”

Harmony rolled her eyes. “That provides little comfort. According to Stafford, everything he has done has been to protect the girls. Including taking their powers and driving them into exile. He has gotten much too comfortable with falsehoods and distortions. Even if he meant what he said, Stafford has a very crooked way of viewing his familial duties.”

“Have you seen him lately?” Cole asked.

“Not since before the last time I saw you,” Harmony said. “Stafford and I haven’t been close for decades, after I had to hide our daughters, but he has been growing even more reclusive lately, conducting all his business through spokespeople.”

“He looks older,” Cole said.

“How much older?” Harmony asked.

“Like your father at best,” Cole said. “Maybe even your grandfather. He looks like a feeble old man, and coughs like crazy, and can’t get out of bed.”

“I heard the rumors he had taken ill,” Harmony said, swaying a little. “I hadn’t guessed the full extent.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, pensive eyes

staring away from Cole. “I have wished him dead so many times. So many times.” Eyes finding Cole again, she smiled unconvincingly, and her voice returned to conversational volume. “The brute brought it on himself. The gifts he robbed from his daughters prolonged his youth. As he loses those powers, he is paying the price.”

“He acts like he may not have much time,” Cole said.

“He may be right,” Harmony said, eyebrows knitting together, pain filling her eyes. “If he wished to live longer, there were places we could have gone, techniques we could have used. But Stafford desired power at any cost. And it has burned him up in so many ways. Why did he give you his seal? Even from his deathbed, that surprises me.”

“I met a younger version of him in the Cave of Memory,” Cole said. “I did his imprint a favor, and he told me a phrase that had a lot of meaning to his family.”

“I know the phrase you mean,” Harmony said.

“That convinced the king to listen to me,” Cole said. “He gave me the seal to help me as I try to stop Ramarro.”

“I see,” Harmony said. “He was willing to sponsor your suicide mission.”

“You think I don’t have a chance?” Cole asked.

“You’re noble to try, Cole,” Harmony said. “I’m not sure if success is very realistic.”

“But worth trying, right? I mean, how much success would I have running from Ramarro? Or hiding? Those aren’t very realistic options either. Might as well try to stop him. I’ve already won some other fights I probably should have lost. Dandalus encouraged me.”

“*The Dandalus?*” Harmony asked. “As in the chief architect of this world? When we spoke before, you mentioned a semblance of his consciousness associated with the Founding Stone.”

“Yeah,” Cole said. “I met his actual echo in the echolands. He was watching over Destiny. And he helped me learn to use my power. It worked better in the echolands.”

“Cole, I will help you however I can,” Harmony said. “I just want to be sure you understand the risks.”

“I understand enough,” Cole said. “Speaking of the Founding Stone, could you help me get to it? I could use more information.”

“The Founding Stone resides under Owandell’s tower,” Harmony said.

“Stafford’s men have seized it. With my husband sponsoring you, a visit should be simple to arrange. For now, you deserve to rest. How can I make you comfortable?”

Cole shook his head. “I can’t rest. Not now. Not when I know who’s coming. And not without knowing how long it will take him to get here. I don’t have any idea how to stop him yet. I don’t even know where to find his prison.”

“You have no clue?” Harmony asked.

“Well, can you keep a secret?” Cole asked.

“Absolutely,” Harmony said.

“Good,” Cole replied. “Because Owandell really wants to know this one.” Cole took a step closer and lowered his voice. “Ramarro is inside a vault in Creon.”

Harmony arched an eyebrow. “Creon? I may be able to help you. What sort of assistance are you looking for?”

“The best you can offer,” Cole said. “Transportation for a start. Advice. Helpers. I’m also hoping you can help me find Mira. And Elegance. You stopped putting stars in the sky. Can you still sense where your daughters are?”

“With an effort I can always sense them,” Harmony said. “Except those who were in the echolands, while they were separated from their physical bodies. That was distressing. I stopped marking Elegance with a star years ago. No need. She hasn’t left her current position in more than thirty years.”

“Is she all right?” Cole wondered.

“She found a safe haven,” Harmony said. “I have my suspicions why. I can reveal exactly where Elegance is located. I don’t believe she has any intention of leaving.”

“Not even to find her power?” Cole wondered.

“Perhaps,” Harmony said. “She’s been responsible from a young age. But is Elegance relevant for you now? Won’t you be looking for Nazeem?”

“If Elegance’s power is loose in Creon, it will be stirring things up,” Cole said. “It might be trying to take over the place like Mira’s power in Sambria or Constance’s power in Zeropolis. It might be going rogue like Honor’s power in Elloweer. Or it might help us like Destiny’s power in Necronum. But it won’t be sitting still.”

Harmony folded her arms, hands cupping her elbows. Her gaze became remote. “I don’t suppose I can spare my girls from the coming trials.”

“There won’t be anywhere to hide them once Ramarro gets loose,” Cole said.

“Owandell knows them. And Ramarro has met three of them. Your enemies are powerful, Harmony. They’ll find whoever they want to find. The time to fight is now. Before Ramarro gets free.”

Harmony gave a quick nod. “Elegance is at the Iron Fort—the most exclusive retirement community in the Outskirts. Time can be manipulated in Creon. Some who wish to prolong their lives take shelter in the Iron Fort. Protected by soaring walls, powerful Wayminders, and an elite mercenary army, it’s a place where those who can buy their way in spend their waning years in safety and comfort.”

“Retirement community?” Cole wondered. “Elegance didn’t age, did she?”

“Not any more than my other daughters,” Harmony said. “Elegance was the eldest when their powers were stolen—nearly a grown woman on the verge of her eighteenth birthday. She has not aged more than that. She simply sought shelter at the safest haven in Creon. Since she took refuge there, I have worried about her least of all my daughters.”

“What about Mira?” Cole asked. “Do you know where I can find her?”

“She returned from the echolands,” Harmony said. “I felt it and pinpointed her location yesterday. The undertaking requires some time and effort. She was at the Locked Shrine.” Harmony closed her eyes. Her brow furrowed. “Strange . . . I no longer sense her.”

“Is that normal?” Cole asked.

“No,” Harmony said. “My attention shifted to Honor and Destiny when I felt them coming this way.”

“She’s not . . .,” Cole said.

“I would have felt her death,” Harmony assured him. “It’s as if she returned to the echolands.”

Cole frowned. That didn’t sound good. Why would Mira go back? Their business in the echolands was done. “Are you sure?”

Harmony opened her eyes. “I’m not in Necronum. It takes time for me to muster sufficient power to really investigate.”

“Maybe I can help,” Cole said. “My power could give you a boost.”

Harmony raised her eyebrows skeptically. “Indeed?”

“Just take my hand,” Cole said, holding one hand out to her.

With some reluctance, the queen extended her hand, longish nails carefully polished. A delicate ring held a brilliant blue stone. When Cole took her hand,

he immediately felt her power, misty and less easily defined than any power he had felt before. He pushed energy into her power, and the mist brightened.

“Oh!” Harmony exclaimed, sounding flustered. “I see! How extraordinary! One moment.” She closed her eyes again. “Yes, she must be in the echolands. In fact, I believe she embarked for the echolands from the Locked Shrine. Or very near there.”

Cole released Harmony’s hand and let the connection break. “I don’t know why she would have gone back,” he said.

“Perplexing,” Harmony said, rubbing her hands together. “You can augment any power like that?”

“I can help people use their power in any kingdom,” Cole said.

“Any kingdom?” Harmony asked. “Here in Junction all powers work a little.”

“I made weapons like my Jumping Sword work in the wrong kingdoms,” Cole said. “I guess I haven’t fully tested it with people yet. But I’m pretty sure.”

“Interesting,” Harmony said. “You explained a little about using your power to revive the powers of others in the echolands. I didn’t understand how fully you might be able to do that here among the physically living. How singular. Now I understand why Owandell wanted you brought along with my daughters. Your power would have fascinated him. So much potential.”

“I’m still getting used to it,” Cole said. “My power was blocked for so long. In the echolands I could change reality, kind of like a shaper in Sambria. I could affect whatever I wanted. It doesn’t seem to work like that in the physical world.”

“Activating abilities outside their corresponding kingdoms is plenty incredible,” Harmony said. “I wonder . . .”

“What?”

“If you were partnered with a Wayminder, you might be able to travel anywhere,” Harmony said.

“Can’t they already go pretty much anywhere?” Cole asked.

“Within Creon they can,” Harmony said. “And from Creon they can open a wayport to just about anywhere in the five kingdoms. Getting back is another matter. Some can manage a wayport from Junction to Creon. But not anywhere else. Ways can be opened to Earth from Junction or Creon, and some have managed it in Zeropolis. Unless the starting point is inside of Creon, Wayminders can’t just open ways from one kingdom to another. Or even from

one place in a kingdom to another location in the same kingdom. But partnered with your ability . . . who knows?"

"Know any Wayminders?" Cole asked.

"The School of Minding in Junction City is the only serious school for Wayminders outside of Creon. When you mentioned Ramarro could be incarcerated in Creon, I had already begun to think of partnering you with a certain Wayminder. She's young but highly talented, and new to Junction, so she isn't embroiled in the politics yet. Meaning I befriended her first."

"You think she would help me?" Cole asked.

"On my recommendation?" Harmony asked. "Absolutely. I am her sponsor. She pledged fealty to me. Let alone after she learns how you might be able to augment her abilities. Go downstairs. I'll send for her. Greta will bring you a meal while you wait."

\* \* \*

Cole had not yet finished his roast duck in a sauce that tasted sweetly of apples when the air in the parlor began to shimmer. Alone in the room, Cole stood up just before a young woman stepped out of the rippling disturbance and the room returned to normal. She looked a few years older than Cole, maybe fourteen or fifteen. Her brown hair had a few small ribbons in it and looked fairly messy and perhaps unevenly cut, but it still kind of worked. Her crimson robe was a little too big and loose, and the striped scarf around her neck didn't match. She blinked at Cole.

"The queen's tower?" she asked.

"Right," Cole said.

She wiped her brow. "Phew. I was a worried for a second. I'm supposed to meet an adventurer named Cole."

"That's me."

She froze. "You're a kid."

"So are you."

She made a displeased face. "I prefer prodigy. Especially from people way younger than me."

"How old are you?" Cole complained.

"I'm practically fifteen."

“Which means fourteen,” Cole said. “Older than me. I guess I look young if you were expecting an adventurer. I’m a prodigy too.”

“A prodigy at what?”

Cole shrugged. “Adventuring.”

She clenched her fists and stamped a foot. “This is what the queen thinks of me? I opened a wayport to get here quickly and impress you. I had no idea she just needed a nanny.”

A door opened and Harmony entered. “Excellent. Hello, Violet. I see you’ve met Cole.”

Violet whirled to face Harmony and dropped to one knee, head bowed. “Yes, Your Highness. He’s . . . less mature than I imagined.”

“I told you he was young in my missive,” the queen said.

“You did, Your Highness,” Violet said, head still bowed. “My mistake. When you called him a young adventurer, I was picturing under thirty. Maybe with muscles and some stubble.”

“Rise, Violet,” Harmony said. “This is an informal meeting.”

Violet stood.

“Was I supposed to kneel?” Cole asked.

“He wasn’t kneeling?” Violet cried, looking over her shoulder at Cole. “He doesn’t even know to kneel when royalty enters?”

“I thought I was supposed to bow!” Cole maintained.

“Did you even bow?” Violet asked.

“It’s a lot to remember,” Cole said.

“Cole is relatively new to our customs,” Harmony said. “And he has perhaps grown overly familiar in the company of royalty. He has been aiding my daughters.”

“Your daughters?” Violet exclaimed in astonishment. “Then the rumors . . . ?”

“They live,” Harmony said. “In fact, they have hardly aged since their supposed deaths. They have survived in exile all these years. I have watched over them from afar. But dire threats have arisen. I need a Wayminder to help Cole on his mission.”

“Will it involve the princesses?” Violet asked.

“Yes,” Harmony said. “But first you must swear secrecy.”

“Nobody can keep a secret like me,” Violet assured her. “I can’t prove it, though. Nobody knows what secrets I know. Only the people who told me.”

“Do you swear?” Harmony asked. “It’s a matter of life and death.”

“I promise,” Violet said.

“Your mission is of the utmost importance,” Harmony said. “I do not exaggerate by saying the fate of the entire Outskirts hangs in the balance.”

Violet glanced over her shoulder. “And you’re sending . . . him?”

“I thought you would be the last person who would judge another based on their age,” Harmony chided. “Aren’t you the youngest candidate to be admitted to the School of Minding in a hundred years?”

Violet scrunched her brow. “What are the chances of lightning striking twice? He’s a lot younger than me. And he’s shorter than me. And he must be really good at . . . something.”

“The mission will be incredibly perilous,” Harmony said. “There is a high risk of fatality. Of course, should the mission fail, we will all face our demise.”

“What can he do?” Violet asked. “Does he have radically weaponized shaping powers? Maybe he wields fire effortlessly? Or summons weather?” She gasped. “Can he kill with his mind?”

“None of those things,” Harmony said. “He does have extraordinary powers, though. You heard me express that the mission will be dangerous?”

Violet gave a little bow. “I’m yours to command. And pleased you thought of me! I have sometimes wondered whether you take me seriously. I’ll keep the secrets! And I’ll assume the risks! When do we leave?”

“Now,” Cole said.

“Wait, now?” Violet asked. “I just opened a wayport! Your Highness, your missive told me to come here through a way. You know a lot about wayminding. I’m talented, but I’ll need a fair amount of rest before opening another.”

“I told you to come here through a wayport precisely so your power would be depleted,” Harmony said. “I want to demonstrate what Cole can do. And to test a theory.”

“He opens wayports too?” Violet exclaimed. “Then why do you need me?”

“I can replenish your power,” Cole said.

“Nobody can do that,” Violet said.

“Cole is extraordinary,” Harmony explained.

“Ah,” Violet said, finally looking at Cole with real interest. “I see why people might ignore your age. Where are we going?”

“Necronum, first,” Cole said.

Violet turned to Harmony and held up a finger. “You know that nobody can —”



“No Wayminder has ever opened a wayport to Necronum from Junction City,” Harmony said. “Only from Creon. We’re testing another theory.”

“I can help your power work anywhere,” Cole said. “We should be able to go from anywhere to anywhere.”

Violet looked from Cole to Harmony and back. “If we weren’t with the queen, I might suspect you were teasing.”

“It’s no joke,” Harmony said. “You know your geography?”

Violet gave a cocky chuckle. “If you can stump me, it’s more than the instructors can do. I baffle them all the time.”

“Then you know the location of the Locked Shrine?” Harmony inquired.

“In Necronum, near Dobson,” Violet said. “Not far from the infamous Gamat Rue.”

“Sounds right,” Cole said.

“Can you open a wayport to the Locked Shrine?” Harmony asked.

“No problem from Creon,” Violet said. “It would be fun. I’ve never gone to Necronum. I opened a way to Zeropolis for my trial. It’s a popular destination since you can take the train back to Junction City. Such tall buildings!”

“Can you attempt to open a way to the Locked Shrine from here?” Harmony asked. “It’s to check on my daughter Miracle.”

“I’d need a lot more power,” Violet said. “At full strength I can’t even feel for a location in Necronum from Junction.”

Harmony looked to Cole. “Ready to give it a try?”

## CHAPTER

# 5

## THE LOCKED SHRINE

I have to hold your hand to establish the connection,” Cole said.

“I bet you use that on all the girls,” Violet replied.

Cole noticed Harmony turning away to cover a laugh. Violet held out her hand.

“Try not to fall in love,” Cole said, gingerly touching a couple of her fingers.

Her power was not as brilliant as some, but steady and strong. Cole focused and forced energy into her power.

“No way!” Violet exclaimed. “I can see Necronum easier than I could ever see Creon from here. Unreal.”

“I’ve never encountered anyone like him,” Harmony said.

“I see the Locked Shrine,” Violet reported. “I can open a wayport. I’ve never felt this . . . ready.”

“Please do,” Harmony said.

A shimmer appeared in the air in front of Violet, somewhat indistinct, but basically oval in shape, taller than her and almost touching the ground. “I feel like I could hold it open all day,” Violet said.

Cole was no longer touching her, but he maintained the connection and continued to energize her power. “You could if I keep helping you.”

“Are you sure your ability will work the same in Necronum?” Violet asked. “If not, it’s a long walk back here. And an even longer trek to Creon.”

“I’m pretty sure,” Cole said. “It’s untested. We’re about to find out.”

“Are you wearing the High King’s seal?” Violet asked. “How did I miss that?”

“I probably shouldn’t wear it openly,” Cole said, tucking the medallion under his shirt.

“Wait, who does he work for?” Violet asked Harmony.

“Stafford and I both support Cole in this mission,” Harmony said. “Every now and again our interests align in a manner that allows cooperation.”

“We should go,” Cole said.

“If you find Mira, bring her back here,” Harmony said. “I wish to see her.”

“Will you want to keep her here?” Cole asked.

“That is between my daughter and me,” Harmony said.

“Okay,” Cole agreed.

“Don’t worry, Your Highness,” Violet said. “We’ll be back. I’m the one taking us places.”

“How do we use the wayport?” Cole asked.

“Step through,” Violet offered.

After giving a little wave to Harmony, Cole stepped into the rippling oval. A sensation of focused pressure swept across his body as he passed through the wayport. Immediately he stood on a grassy slope. A series of terraced ponds were arrayed before him, overflowing into one another down the incline, fed at the top by a stream. Beyond the lowest pool, the stream flowed away. In the midst of the tiered ponds, about halfway up, smoldered the charred remains of a building, thin tendrils of smoke rising from the debris.

Violet stepped through beside him. “I still felt the energy from you after you stepped through,” she said. “Good thing. If waywalking to Necronum had cut off the connection, you could have been stuck here alone.”

“I still feel the connection,” Cole said. “I’ll break it.”

The shimmering wayport vanished.

Violet gave a little gasp. “That was abrupt. I went from full to empty in an instant. What happened here?”

“Was that our shrine?” Cole asked.

“I’m afraid so,” Violet said.

“I thought you saw it before we came,” Cole said.

“I saw the area,” Violet said. “I don’t see a perfect picture. It’s not like looking with your eyes. I get a general sense of an area. I was focused on the locks.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s unlocked at this point,” Cole said.

“Calling it the Locked Shrine is wordplay,” Violet said. “The locks are the surrounding ponds connected by gates and sluices so the water levels can be adjusted.”

“You sound like a travel guide,” Cole said.

“I read a lot,” Violet replied. “We’re looking for Miracle Pemberton?”

“Mira,” Cole said. He turned around. There was not another person in sight. “I guess everyone got scared off when the place burned down.”

Violet shook her head. “There’s water all around it. Buckets, people!”

“It was probably an attack. Plenty of enemies want my friends captured or dead. Harmony told me Mira isn’t dead. But she is in the echolands.”

“Then her body has to be somewhere,” Violet said.

“Maybe somebody snuck off with it,” Cole said. “Should we take a closer look?”

“My power feels dead now,” Violet said. “Completely drained. I can’t see Junction or Creon. I can get no read on opening a wayport. Aren’t you curious to see if we’ll be able to get back?”

Cole took her hand and forced power into her. It felt no more challenging than it had in Junction.

“Amazing,” Violet said. “Never leave me, Cole. You’re my new best friend. I feel superb. Like I haven’t opened a wayport in a month. And now I can see other kingdoms better than I could in Creon. I could open a way back to Harmony’s tower right now. From this same spot! It’s usually tough to open a new wayport in a place where another wayport was recently established. Not with you around.”

Cole released her hand and let the connection to her power lapse.

“And I’m spent again,” Violet said, slumping a tad. “Like I should be. It should take days for me to open another wayport in an ideal spot. And even with a year to rest, opening a wayport in Necronum would never happen.” She grabbed Cole by the shoulders. “Do you realize all we could do together?”

“Open ways?” Cole tried.

Releasing him, Violet looked around, eyes blinking rapidly, hands waving like a conductor. “We could travel the five kingdoms! We could fearlessly explore remote corners of the world, knowing the return trip would be easy. The far reaches of Necronum, Elloweer, Zeropolis, and Sambria have not been properly mapped. Wayminders won’t often open wayports to the distant corners of the world because the journey back is too long and arduous. Only the bravest explorers attempt those kinds of expeditions. We could do it whenever the mood hit us!”

“True,” Cole said. “And being able to teleport around will help us on our mission.”

“We can travel as no Wayminder has traveled before,” Violet continued. “We

can open ways whenever the desire strikes. Breakfast at the Prismatic Falls in Sambria, lunch at a marsh town in Elloweer, and dinner on top of Skybreaker Tower in Zeropolis.”

“Except we have a mission,” Cole reminded her again.

“We have to find Mira,” Violet said.

“That is only the beginning,” Cole said. “Have you heard of torivors?”

“Only two torivors ever came to the Outskirts,” Violet said. “The Lost Palace in Elloweer is one of the forbidden destinations. It holds Trillian. The other torivor, Ramarro, was lost from history.”

“Ramarro was trapped in the echolands,” Cole said. “I fought him with some of the princesses and some friends. He is coming back.”

“An actual torivor?” Violet asked.

“So powerful he can bend reality just about however he wants,” Cole said. “You’ll keep all of this secret?”

“I swear,” Violet said. “And I believe you, by the way, even though it sounds absurd. If Queen Harmony is backing you, and you really have been helping her lost daughters, I might be ready to believe anything.”

“I promise I’m not kidding,” Cole said. “Or wrong. Ramarro is locked in a vault in Creon. It’s really powerful. A guy named Kendo Rattan built it.”

“Of course he did,” Violet said. “The most famous Wayminder of all time. The father of our shaping discipline. The first and greatest of Creon’s Grand Shapers.”

“Strong or not, the vault may not hold Ramarro for long,” Cole said. “We have to find a way to stop him before he gets free.”

Violet scratched her head. “That sounds impossible.”

“All part of the fun,” Cole said. “First we need to find Mira and my friends. Let’s have a look.”

Cole started working his way around the terraced ponds toward the scorched remnants of the Locked Shrine. He had to hop little channels of water, walk along the tops of wooden dams, cross little footbridges, and climb a variety of stairs and ladders. As he neared the ruins, the reek of charred wood grew stronger.

“Think whoever burned down the shrine is still watching the place?” Violet asked. She followed a few steps behind Cole.

Cole paused to look around. “I hope not. I don’t see anybody. If trouble shows up, we open a wayport and scam.” He started walking again. “I just

realized I don't have any weapons. Do you?"

"Wayminders don't carry arms as a rule," Violet said.

"Why not?"

"We offer transportation services to any who will pay," Violet said. "We work hard to stay politically neutral. By not carrying weapons, we generally don't get attacked."

"Spend time with me, and you're going to get attacked," Cole said. "You might want to think about getting a weapon."

"Our order has norms."

"Does it really matter? Are you even a full Wayminder yet?"

"Of course I'm a full Wayminder!" Violet exclaimed. "I'm young, not incompetent! Do you think Harmony would give you a trainee?"

"Aren't you a student?" Cole asked.

"The School of Minding in Junction City is for graduate studies," Violet said. "Only true Wayminders can attend. The training happens back in Creon. Junction would be a difficult place to learn. Our shaping is so much weaker there. But it allows for interesting studies."

"So no weapons for you," Cole said.

"Not likely," Violet replied.

A small moat surrounded the circular jumble of smoldering debris, the water dark and still. It was too wide to jump.

"There must have been a bridge," Cole said.

"Not anymore," Violet said. "Do you really think we'll find anything in the ashes? Your friends can't be in there. Not if they're alive."

"Probably not," Cole agreed, staring at the fuming timbers. "Maybe we'll find a clue? Some sign? Where else can we look? If Mira went to the echolands from nearby, her body has to be in the area."

"The closest town is Dobson," Violet said.

"If the shrine was under attack, it probably means Mira was discovered," Cole said. "I doubt they could have made it to the town."

"Unless they had an early warning," Violet said. "Mira could have slipped out before the attack started."

"Harmony felt like Mira went to the echolands from this shrine," Cole said.

"Maybe she meant from the vicinity," Violet said. "Or maybe her body was smuggled to Dobson. Getting to the town is no big deal for us. Normally I wouldn't open a way to travel a short distance, but with you around, why not?"

Actually, I could open a wayport to the other side of the moat if you want to poke around.”

“Sure,” Cole said. “Let’s go across.”

He took her hand and infused her power with energy, and the air nearby became distorted. Cole could see another shimmer on the far side of the moat.

“Go ahead,” Violet said.

Cole stepped into the near shimmer and came out the other one. He looked back at Violet and watched her come through.

Holding his hand over his nose and mouth to help with the potent odor, Cole roamed the burned rubble. He didn’t climb where blackened timbers had piled up, choosing instead to skirt the fringes. He saw no bodies or bones. Maybe everyone had evacuated? Or maybe the attackers had carted them away?

“Hey!” a voice called from the far side of the moat.

Cole spun around to find a young boy staring at him. He had black hair and faint freckles and was perhaps seven or eight. Cole walked to the edge of the moat. “Are you here alone?”

“No gold or nothing over there,” the boy said. “I already checked.”

“How’d you get across?” Cole asked.

“Used a board,” the boy said. “Skinny one. I have good balance.”

“I’m not hunting for gold,” Cole said.

“What are you looking for?” the boy asked.

“Some friends,” Cole said.

“Maybe I can help,” the boy said. “I came here a lot.”

“Did your parents work here?”

“I don’t have parents,” the boy said. “The shrines are good about giving orphans work and food. A little schooling, too. What’s your name?”

“Cole. What’s yours?”

“Arie,” he said. “You’re really named Cole?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I’m supposed to check,” the boy said. “Have you ever been a slave? Answer true.”

“Yes.”

“What was your first slave job?”

The kid clearly had knowledge of him and was vetting him. “Sky Raider.”

“What do Sky Raiders say before a mission?”

“Die bravely,” Cole said. “To avoid getting jinxed.”

“What was the name of the little robot in Zeropolis?”

“Sidekick.”

“Who is your brother?”

“Hunter.”

“Okay,” Arie said. “You pass. Who is the girl?”

Cole looked over his shoulder to find Violet standing behind him. “My friend Violet.”

“Wink if she’s trouble,” Arie said more quietly.

“She’s on my side,” Cole assured him.

“Looks like it’s just the two of you,” Arie said. “I’m supposed to fetch somebody who wants to talk to you. Somebody who knows about your friends. Wait here?”

“Is the person far?” Cole asked.

“Not too far,” Arie said. “We were keeping watch for you.”

“Who burned this place down?” Cole asked.

“Enforcers,” Arie replied. He spat disgustedly into the moat.

“Are they gone?” Cole asked.

“I think so,” Arie said. “It was quiet all afternoon until you came along.”

“When did it burn down?”

“Last night,” Arie said. “I’ll be back.” He scampered off.

“If he’d tell us where he’s going, I could open a way,” Violet said.

Cole shook his head. “It might scare him. He’s acting as a scout. Plus, it would give away our secret advantage. We better just wait.”

“Should we go back across the moat?” Violet asked.

Cole scanned the fuming ruins. “Yeah. I didn’t find anything useful.”

“Not unless we can find a use for burned wood,” Violet said.

They joined hands, and she opened a wayport back to the other side of the moat. Cole stepped through, and she followed.

“It doesn’t tire you out?” Violet asked. “Giving me all that energy?”

“Not really,” Cole said.

“You used to be a slave?”

“When I first came here,” Cole said. “I’m from Outside. A place called Arizona. My friends were taken by slavers. I came through and tried to help them but got captured too.”

“If you’re from Outside, a Wayminder must have helped the slavers.”

“The first person I met here in the Outskirts was a Wayminder.”



“You have a freemark,” she observed.

Cole held up a hand to look at the mark. “The Grand Shaper of Sambria changed it for me.”

“Naturally,” Violet said. “You know Miracle Pemberton. Why not the exiled Grand Shaper of Sambria?”

“I’ve had some adventures,” Cole said.

“Some Wayminders have helped slavers,” Violet said. “I don’t agree with slavery.”

“That’s something we have in common,” Cole said.

“Plenty of us don’t,” Violet said. “Wayminders, I mean. We’re not supposed to get too political, though. We aren’t noisy about it.”

“Sometimes you have to get loud,” Cole said. “Even when you’re not supposed to.”

Violet nodded. “I agree. It’s all about finding the right moment.”

“Wait, you’re a Wayminder,” Cole said as something occurred to him.

“You’re catching on!” Violet said with a little grin.

“I mean, can you open a way to my home?” Cole asked. “To Earth? To Arizona?”

“In theory,” Violet said. “I’ve never opened a wayport to the Outside. That’s very advanced. I’d need more instruction. I’ve never found a connection to Earth. Where in Arizona?”

“Have you heard of Mesa?” Cole asked.

“Phoenix area,” Violet said. “Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer Gilbert? Or Chandler?”

“How do you know those places?” Cole exclaimed. Plenty of Americans who lived outside of Arizona hadn’t heard of those cities!

“I told you I’m good at geography,” Violet said. “Can’t get enough of it. Earth is the main place Wayminders visit outside of the Outskirts. There are rumors of other worlds, but I’ve never heard specifics.”

“I hope to get home someday,” Cole said.

“A visit wouldn’t be too hard,” Violet said. “I know some Wayminders who could get you there. A few could even do it from Junction.”

“I want to get home and stay home,” Cole said. “I want my family to remember me.”

Violet sucked in air through her teeth. “That could be tough. Getting there could happen. But you would be drawn back to the Outskirts before long. And

those who know you best will have forgotten you. Casual acquaintances might remember you a little.”

“I know how it works,” Cole said. “But I’m going to find a way to change it.”

“Now that would be a project!” Violet exclaimed. “Talk about testing the limits of the possible.”

“Just you wait,” Cole said. “I’ll figure it out.”

“I hope so.” Sighing, Violet looked beyond Cole. “When will that kid come back? I’m getting sick of this smell.”

## CHAPTER

# 6

## DEENA

After some time, Cole spotted Arie and a tall, bony woman making their way between the ponds toward the burned shrine. She had long, graying hair and waved at Cole when she saw him.

As they drew near, the woman came directly to Cole and took his hands in hers. He noticed her short fingernails and dry skin. “Welcome, young Cole. I am Deena. Your friends told me to watch for you. They mentioned others as well, but you especially. And here you are.” She glanced at Violet. “Well met, young woman.”

“Good day,” Violet replied with a small bow.

Holding her hands, Cole could sense Deena’s power, fairly strong, and somewhat murky. “Do you know where I can find my friends?”

“I better know,” Deena said. “I hid them.” She looked around. “I don’t believe any of the Enforcers lingered. But who knows for certain? Those jackals can be subtle.”

“Burning down a shrine is subtle?” Violet asked.

“They can be harsh, too,” Deena said. “Though they have never gone so far as to directly attack a shrine before. Unprecedented boldness.”

“Almost like they suspect the world is ending,” Violet murmured.

“Are my friends hidden nearby?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Deena said. She held up a small golden strand. “First, if you are indeed Cole, Jace told me you could turn this little string into a rope.”

Seeing the rope made Cole happy. It was almost like seeing Jace. He accepted it, found his shaping power could connect easily, and forced some energy into it. The little string expanded to the size of a bullwhip.

“Excellent,” Deena said. “We should waste no time.”

“Wait,” Violet said. “How do we know we can trust you?”

“Because I haven’t attacked you, and I’ll bring you right to your friends,” Deena said.

“Fair enough,” Cole said.

“This way,” Deena said, leading them around one of the nearest ponds along a squishy embankment, and then down a ladder to a small wooden platform beside another pond, this one larger and partly covered with lily pads. She started turning a crank. “Arie? Would you go close the other intake?”

“Completely?” the boy asked with relish.

“Yes,” Deena said. “Then open the outflow gate all the way.”

“You got it,” the boy said, running along the edge of the pond to another platform, where he started turning a crank of his own.

“What are we doing?” Cole asked.

“Draining the pond,” Violet said.

Deena winked. “Funny thing about traveling into the echolands. The body left behind enters a hibernation state. Whole metabolism slows to a crawl. Keeps a person from wasting away. Slow heartbeat. Minimal breathing.”

“They’re underwater?” Cole asked.

“Inside sealed capsules,” Deena said. “I sent them back to the echolands so I could use my best hiding place. In hibernation, they would last at least a week down there, even with the small amount of fresh air trapped with them.”

Deena hustled along a narrow path bordered by tiny, dense clover to the dam at the other side of the pond. There she turned another crank. On the far end of the dam, Arie cranked as well.

“How’d you put them down there?” Cole asked.

“We have weighty boxes for the purpose,” Deena said. “They look like coffins. An echo warned us of the approaching Enforcers. It was too late for conventional fleeing. We sank Joe, Jace, and Mira before our enemies arrived. The Enforcers demanded we give up the princess. When we refused, they set fire to the shrine. Some who worked here were slain. Several of us fled. I was chosen to linger and awaken our sunken guests after the Enforcers departed. Before they went into the water, your comrades charged me to keep watch for you. And for Dalton or Hunter. They gave me questions to verify your identities, in case of deception. If nobody showed up, I would have extracted them in three days.”

“The water level is falling,” Violet observed.

“It doesn’t take long,” Deena said. “Ingenious design. Different waterfalls

come and go depending on how the flow is managed. Not all the ponds can be completely emptied. This one is the deepest pool designed to be fully drained.”

Arie rejoined them. “I’ve never seen this one dry,” he said.

“We don’t empty them often,” Deena said. “Not entirely.” She closed her eyes, breathing slowly. When she opened her eyes, she smiled at Cole. “Your friends are nearby. Their echoes have found their way here. I began summoning them as soon as they crossed over. I should be able to rouse them with little difficulty.”

“Why summoned?” Violet asked. “Didn’t they cross over here?”

Deena shook her head. “They had all been to the echolands before, so their lifesparks joined their existing echoes. They had some distance to travel before I could restore them to their physical bodies.”

Cole watched the water level drop. Eventually, three bronze coffins were revealed. As the pond finished draining, Cole followed Deena down into the resultant depression, avoiding puddles as they picked their way among slimy rocks and stranded lily pads.

“These containers are airtight,” Deena explained as she approached one of the coffins. She unfastened some clasps along one end of the lid. “They have seldom been used.”

Deena grabbed one side of the lid, Cole the other, and, pushing upward, they raised it on surprisingly smooth hinges. Inside rested Mira, still as death, and completely dry. Cole couldn’t resist a shudder at the horrifying sight.

Deena closed her eyes and extended one hand, lips moving soundlessly. Mira sat up with a gasp, her eyes fluttering open. She looked disoriented for a moment, but when she recognized Cole, her face lit up, and he felt a rush of relief. “You found us! Good job!” Her gaze switched to Deena. “Hurry with the others. Some troublemakers just showed up.”

“I saw how she opened it,” Violet said from behind Cole, grabbing his shoulder. “Come on.”

Cole ran to one of the other coffins with Violet, while Mira and Deena raced to the third. Violet moved along one side of the container, undoing clasps. Cole had not paid close enough attention to learn the trick, but he helped Violet lift the lid when she had finished.

Jace lay inside, frowning in hibernation.

Deena ran toward them, slipping on the greasy stones but somehow keeping her balance. Joe clambered from the other coffin, soaked and dripping.

“Quick,” Joe called. “We’re right by a slipstream. They’re trying to force him

in.”

Deena reached the coffin and closed her eyes. Jace flinched, rolled over, and then stared wildly up at Cole. “Took you long enough!”

“We’re doing our best!” Cole said.

“At least I made it,” Jace said, swinging out of the coffin. “You couldn’t have cut it any closer. I was getting chucked into a slipstream when I woke up in the box. I’m not sure if our echoes are going to escape. I may have to skip the echolands when I die.”

“Who are they?” Violet asked, pointing.

Cole turned to see two men standing in the middle of the empty pond. The bald one was tall and broad. The shorter one was heavysset with a long brown beard. Both glared. Both had a hint of transparency to them.

“Echoes,” Deena said.

“They were both there,” Jace confirmed. “About ten others as well. Some of them were rushing away, talking about reinforcements.” Jace raised his voice. “Nice try!”

The bald echo pointed at him. “Your echo rode the stream. You will never return to the echolands.”

“You can keep your lousy land!” Jace cried, crouching to pick up a slimy stone. “All of it! I’m happy to go straight to the Other when my time is up!” He threw the stone, and it passed harmlessly through the echo’s chest.

The bald echo smiled. “That will be promptly arranged, I’m sure.” His stare shifted to Joe and Mira. “We have your echoes in custody. When you return here, you will be ours.”

In the distance a horn sounded. A second horn answered from another direction.

“Enforcers!” Arie called down from the platform where he stood watch. “Lots of them!”

The two echoes in the pond grinned.

“See you shortly,” the bald one said to Mira.

Deena stretched a hand toward the echoes. “You dare materialize and threaten in my presence?” she sang out. “I bind you!”

The two echoes went from gloating to alarmed. They held still, trembling, eyes fearful.

“I call you home!” Deena yelled. Then her voice became gentler. “Luxuriate in the homesong. Submit to the tranquility. Answer the summons. Away with

you!”

The two echoes disappeared.

“Did you get them?” Jace asked hopefully.

“They didn’t stand a chance so near to a slipstream,” Deena said. “In they went. It’s not much consolation. My deepest apologies to all of you. I didn’t know the Enforcers were so near. This has been a trap, sprung simultaneously in the physical world and in the echolands.”

“No problem,” Cole said with a big smile. “We have a Wayminder.”

Mira rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t work like that, Cole. She can’t open a way in Necronum.”

“She can with me around,” Cole said, taking Violet’s hand.

A glimmering oval appeared nearby.

“Yes!” Jace said, raising a clenched fist. “Cole, you’re the best!”

“Hurry,” Cole said. “Deena, you and Arie should come too.”

“Arie!” Deena shouted. “Come down here immediately!”

The orphan scrambled down the steep side of the pond, falling part of the way. Clothes and skin streaked with mud, he dashed toward them across the pebbly ground.

“We have company!” Jace warned.

Cole looked up to see an enormous bird of prey swooping toward the pond. An Enforcer dangled from the talons.

“Through the wayport,” Cole urged.

Deena stepped into the oval and vanished. Then Arie.

“My rope?” Jace asked.

“I have it,” Cole said, fishing the golden strand from his pocket and making sure it was still connected to his power.

The huge bird screeched and dropped the Enforcer, who rolled to a stop at the edge of the pond and produced a crossbow. He raised it and took aim.

Cole passed the golden rope to Jace.

Joe stepped in front of Mira as she entered the shimmering wayport. When he turned to follow her through, a quarrel pierced his thigh. Joe stumbled into the wayport and disappeared.

The Enforcer produced a second quarrel as the golden rope reached him and snaked around his waist. The rope heaved him high into the air and then smashed him down against the glossy stones of the emptied pond, armor

clanging violently. As Jace retracted the rope, the broken body remained motionless.

“Go,” Cole ordered

Jace lunged through. Cole followed.

Suddenly he was back in the parlor inside Harmony’s tower. Arie turned slowly, staring at the room with astonished eyes. Deena and Mira crouched over Joe, examining the quarrel that jutted from his thigh. Cole winced at the dark red stain spreading across the wet pant leg from the wound. He couldn’t help thinking about the time Sultan had bled out and died from a wounded shoulder.

“I can yank it,” Jace offered, his golden rope twirling above him like a magical lasso.

“Don’t you dare,” Joe growled through gritted teeth.

Jace’s rope shrank back into a small golden strand. Violet came through the way, and it disappeared behind her.

“There must be a healer around,” Mira said. “Where are we?”

“You mom’s tower,” Cole said.

Mira glanced at him. “Really?” She looked around. “She didn’t use to live in a tower.”

“Your dad lives in another one,” Cole said.

Mira turned back to Joe. “Did you hear that? We’re with my mother. We’ll get you the best healer in the Outskirts.”

His expression strained, Joe gave a nod. “Some painkiller would do.”

“Why are your clothes all wet?” Jace asked.

“His container must have sprung a slow leak,” Deena said. “Some air remained when we opened it. But not much.”

“Thanks for shielding me,” Mira said. “You shouldn’t have.”

“I was trying to get away too,” Joe replied modestly.

“You probably saved my life,” Mira said.

“Who’s that?” Arie asked, pointing to Queen Harmony, who had just entered the room.

She stood staring at her daughter.

Mira ran to her mother and embraced her.

Harmony hugged back, her expression stunned. Tears filled her eyes, and she tightened her embrace.

Only Violet knelt.

“We need a healer, Mother,” Mira said. “Our friend Joe was shot while



protecting me.”

“Of course,” Harmony replied, her lips finally parting in a huge smile. “Right away, my darling Miracle.” Harmony held Miracle away from her and looked her up and down. “You haven’t aged a day.”

“I barely started again once I got my power back,” Mira said.

“You’re unhurt?” Harmony asked.

“Mother—Joe!” Mira insisted, almost whining. Cole had never heard that particular tone from Mira before.

“Right away,” Harmony said, bustling out of the room.

Deena was using a frilly doily stolen from a nearby table to apply pressure at the source of the bleeding. Sweat slicked Joe’s face.

“Those Enforcers will wonder what happened,” Jace said.

“What about the one with the great raptor?” Deena asked. “Didn’t he see our escape?”

“I took care of that one,” Jace said. “No living Enforcers saw how we got away.”

Queen Harmony returned.

Violet knelt again.

“My personal physician is on his way,” Harmony said. “Rise, Violet. Formalities end when people are bleeding.” The queen crouched beside Joe and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you for protecting my daughter. You have my lasting gratitude. Rest assured that you will soon be in some of the most capable hands in Junction.”

“Thanks,” Joe said.

“Who are our other guests?” Harmony asked, straightening.

“This is Deena,” Mira said. “She took care of our physical bodies when we were in the echolands the first time. Then she sent me, Joe, and Jace back to the echolands and hid our bodies when the Enforcers attacked.”

“You also have my deepest gratitude,” Harmony said, inclining her head. “And this young man?”

“Jace has traveled with me and Cole since we escaped the Sky Raiders,” Mira said. “I owe him my life many times over.”

“Thank you, Jace,” Harmony said.

“We have more to do,” Jace said. “Right, Cole?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “And this little guy is Arie.”

“I found Cole and drained the pond,” the boy said. “You don’t have to thank

me.”

“If you helped my daughter make it home, I thank you nonetheless,” Harmony said. “You will all be rewarded.”

“Spend it quickly,” Jace muttered. “There’s a torivor coming.”

A short, narrow man entered the room, his mostly bald head offset by a gray goatee. He hurried to Joe and placed both hands on his leg.

“What did you do?” Joe asked. “The pain just . . . stopped.”

“A minor changing,” the physician said. “I’m from Elloweer. Not a pretty wound. The quarrel was designed to wreak havoc. But I’ll get you patched up.”

Jace was looking around the room. “So this is the First Castle.”

“Not the best part,” Mira said. “You should see the parade grounds. And the stables. And of course the main residence.”

“I make do here,” Harmony said.

“Sorry, Mother,” Mira said. “I didn’t mean . . .”

“Do not speak of sorrow, dear one,” Harmony said. “You belonged here these many years, and instead you lived like a hunted trophy. My sorrow is an ocean without shores. Where do we begin, my child? I want to hear about your time away from me! Tell me of your sisters! I understand you have seen all but Elegance. I want to know everything!”

Deena bowed. “I imagine you would prefer some privacy.”

“You all deserve to be made more comfortable,” Harmony said. “My head of staff is on her way!”

“Did you figure out how to get me to the Founding Stone?” Cole asked.

Harmony gasped. “I meant to tell you! The Founding Stone is gone!”

“Isn’t that impossible?” Deena asked.

“Legend has it the stone cannot be moved,” Harmony said. “And yet it is clearly missing. Not a fragment remains.”

“Owandell must have moved it somehow,” Cole said. “He used shapecraft to break off a piece and send it to the echolands. He must have used shapecraft to move the whole stone.”

“It’s unsettling,” Harmony said.

“I wonder what he’s going to do with it,” Cole said.

“Maybe he just wanted to keep it away from you,” Mira suggested.

“I’m not sure it can do much unless I power it up,” Cole said. “But maybe they can energize it somehow through shapecraft.”

“I will do my best to find it,” Harmony promised. “What would you like to

do now?"

"I kind of want to keep moving," Cole said.

"Where to next?" Jace asked.

"Well, with Violet, we can go anywhere," Cole said. "I need a good weapon. I couldn't bring my Jumping Sword back from the echolands. The Sky Raiders had a bunch. I thought maybe we could go there and resupply."

"The Sky Raiders?" Jace exclaimed. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Do you know how many nights I contemplated my death in that place? And how many days I barely dodged it?"

"No scouting missions," Cole said. "Just buying gear."

"Adam won't sell anything cheap," Jace said. "Who is paying?"

Cole pulled out the king's seal. "The High King gave me unlimited credit."

Jace stared openmouthed. "Unlimited credit? Of course he did! Because the world is about to end. Life is always torture."

Cole tucked the medallion away. "At least it should get me a Jumping Sword." He turned to Violet. "Can you take us to Skyport?"

"I've always hoped to go there!" Violet gushed. "I want to look off the Brink! Endless sky up *and* down? I have to see it!"

"You'll come back here before heading to Creon," Mira said.

"We can," Cole said uncertainly.

Mira turned to her mother. "You won't try to stop me?"

"We should talk," Harmony said. "Cole, absolutely come back before you go after Elegance."

"Okay," Cole said. He glanced at Jace. "Coming?"

Jace held up his hand. "I've never been to Skyport with a freemark. Freaky memories or not, I wouldn't miss it." He bowed to Harmony. "Nice to meet you, Your Highness."

Violet joined hands with Cole, and a shimmering disturbance appeared.

"The pleasure is all mine," Harmony said. "Good luck."

Jace gave a lopsided smile. "That doesn't work where we're going right now."

"Die bravely," Mira said.

"That's more like it," Jace said. "Off we go."

## CHAPTER

# 7

## JUMPING SWORD

Constructed from stone and heavy timbers, the sprawling main building of Skyport clung to the edge of the Brink. Several porches and balconies projected out over the endless drop. Beyond the Brink, in a bright sky decorated with puffy white clouds, several castles floated at different altitudes, one of them close enough to allow Cole to make out details like the battlements on the walls and towers. A single skycraft floated serenely near the closest castle.

Cole stood on a slope looking down at Skyport. Jace emerged from the quivering disturbance beside him, and then Violet came through as well. The wayport closed behind her.

“That has to be the Brink,” Violet said, staring out at the vista.

“Brings back awful memories,” Jace said.

“Should we head into Skyport?” Cole prompted. “You could go out on the porch and look down.”

Violet clapped her hands. “Let’s go!”

“Couldn’t you have put the wayport a little closer?” Cole asked. “Or inside the common room?”

“Slightly closer maybe,” Violet said. “I thought coming in on the side of the valley would grant a better view. And Wayminders never open a way into a building uninvited. Don’t you know that?”

“I did,” Jace volunteered.

“I didn’t,” Cole admitted. “Why not?”

“We don’t want to be hated,” Violet said. “At the beginning of our discipline, some Wayminders opened ways to spy or steal. Very soon we were all despised and hunted. Certain rulers vowed to exterminate us. Our leadership made a pledge never to enter a building without written permission. All Wayminders agreed, most voluntarily. Eventually we earned back the public trust. A

Wayminder who violates that rule is immediately stripped of all rights and banished.”

“Harmony gave you written permission to enter her tower,” Cole said.

“Exactly,” Violet said. “In the missive she sent.”

“Come on,” Jace said, trotting down the slope toward Skyport. “We’re wasting daylight.”

Cole and Violet caught up, and together they descended to Skyport and entered the mostly empty common room. A few men played cards in one corner. Adam Jones, a burly man with a grayish beard and long curly hair, sat on his cushioned throne of translucent jade.

“This is a surprise!” Adam bellowed when the three kids entered. “I didn’t expect to set eyes on you two again. Should I prepare for an invasion of legionnaires?”

“The legionnaires were after Mira,” Cole said, approaching the elaborate throne.

“Have they nabbed her?” Adam asked.

“Almost,” Cole said. “Not yet.”

“You boys ready to get back to work?” Adam asked. “I still own both of you.”

“Nobody owns me,” Jace said, showing his freemark.

“Me neither,” Cole agreed, doing the same.

Adam leaned forward. “Come here.” He inspected both freemarks. “Who did this work? You keep him away from here. The scoundrel will drive me right out of business. And who is this young maiden? A Wayminder, I see.”

“I’m Violet,” she said with a small curtsy.

“I gather you brought her to me as a peace offering?” Adam asked.

“No,” Cole said. “She’s with us.”

Violet held up her freemark.

“Those legionnaires did plenty of damage when they tore through here,” Adam said soberly. “I lost three of my scouts when you ran off, plus Mira. And I had to bribe the interlopers to leave us in peace after we slowed their efforts to arrest you.”

Cole pulled the royal seal from under his shirt and showed Adam. “The High King will cover the expenses.”

“You now speak for Stafford Pemberton?” Adam exclaimed. “Somebody has risen in the world! Are you here on official business? Should I set the table with my bestmost utensils?”

“No meals,” Cole said.

Jace elbowed him, then stepped toward Adam. “What are you having?”

“If the High King is paying, we can supply just about whatever you want,” Adam said. He looked intently at Cole. “Is this some sort of stunt? Where did you get that seal?”

“From the High King,” Cole said. “It’s legit.”

“Aye, it appears authentic,” Adam said. He raised his voice. “Bennett! Prepare an invoice for the damage done by the legionnaires, the bribes paid, and the value of three scouts.” Adam leaned back in his throne and drummed his hands on the arms. “Now . . . what else are you after? Or did you just come here to settle up accounts?”

“I lost my Jumping Sword,” Cole said. “I need a replacement. The High King will pay for that, too.”

Adam winced. “We used to have several Jumping Swords. Then we lost the shapecrafter who made them.”

“Durny,” Cole said.

Adam gave a nod. “We still haven’t found an adequate replacement. Scouting is dangerous. Only one Jumping Sword remains. We don’t let the scouts use it. We keep it in the armory in case of emergency.”

Cole stepped closer to the throne and lowered his voice. “This is a major emergency. The entire Outskirts is in danger. We’re trying to stop a torivor.”

Adam laughed. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t you know about torivors?” Cole asked.

“Vaguely,” Adam said. “Fearmongering spooksters from the ether or some such nonsense. Isn’t there one in Ellower? I’m not a mythologist.”

“There are only two in the Outskirts,” Cole said. “One is about to get free. If he does, the Outskirts ends. No more salvaging. No more Skyport. No more Brink. No more Sambria.”

“Sounds awfully dramatic,” Adam said. “In my experience, boasts that grand don’t tend to pay what they promise. I don’t understand the witchery of torivors, but I am a merchant. I’ll sell you the Jumping Sword if the High King will cover it.”

“Good enough,” Cole said.

“Funny you should mention torivors,” Adam said.

“Why?” Cole asked.

“One of our teams found a talking castle yesterday that promised an

important message about a torivor called Ramarro.”

Cole stiffened and leaned forward. “What was the message?”

Adam shrugged. “The scout who entered the castle never returned. That means we abort.”

“Is the castle still out there?” Cole asked. “Has it entered the Eastern Cloudwall yet?”

“Wouldn’t take long to find out,” Adam said. “Are you interested?”

“Yeah,” Cole said, his heart racing. “We need to get there as soon as we can.”

“Make yourselves comfortable while you wait,” Adam said. “I’ll send for the sword.”

Violet cleared her throat. “Do you mind if I look off the edge? I’ve never been to the Brink.”

“Be my guest,” Adam said. “I’ll have a scope brought to you.”

\* \* \*

“No way am I returning to a sky castle,” Jace said. “Not if you tied me up and dragged me. Especially one that already killed a scout.”

They sat beside each other in rocking chairs, tilting lazily. Violet stood at the railing peering through a small telescope.

“But Dandalus created the cloudwalls that make and destroy the castles,” Cole said. “What if he’s sending a message?”

“Then he should have found a delivery method that doesn’t kill scouts,” Jace said. “I used to be sure I would die in a sky castle. I even managed to make peace with the idea. We’re all just prolonging the inevitable, right? And then we got away. And I gradually accepted that I wouldn’t die in the sky. Don’t make me do this, Cole.”

“You can stay behind with Violet,” Cole said. “Too much depends on stopping Ramarro. We have no real leads. I have to look.”

Jace sighed miserably. “I’m braver than you. If you go, I have to go. Let’s just take the sword and get out of here. Who knows? Adam could be messing with you.”

“You think?”

“Why not? He could just want you to give him a free scouting mission.”

“I’d check the castle before I went inside. Ever heard of a talking sky castle?”

“Nope,” Jace said.

“Which one talks?” Violet asked, her telescope aimed at one of the castles.

“We don’t know,” Cole said. “Probably not one to the west. They’re created in the Western Cloudwall and drift east to the Eastern Cloudwall, where they vanish into a huge vortex. The talking one was explored yesterday, so if it’s still around, it should be in the east.”

“So much to see,” Violet said. “Are you sure you don’t want to borrow the telescope?”

“We’ve seen them a lot closer,” Jace said.

“But not *these* castles,” Violet stressed. “A person could spend a lifetime studying this phenomenon.”

“Or lose a lifetime,” Jace said. “Really quickly. I’ve seen too many people die in those pretty castles.”

“They’re not all pretty,” Violet corrected. “They all have presence, though. Character.”

“And death traps,” Jace added. “Most of them have death traps.”

She pointed the telescope downward. “There has to be a bottom somewhere.”

“Nobody has ever found one,” Jace said.

“At least nobody who lived to tell about it,” Violet said, aiming her telescope straight up. “Who knows what trickery the designers used? Looping space, maybe? Illusions? What is behind this sky? It can’t extend forever.”

A man came out onto the porch.

“Wenzel,” Jace said, rocking to his feet.

Cole recognized the man but had never officially met him.

“Jace,” Wenzel acknowledged. He held out a sheathed short sword to Cole. “This is yours now.”

“Thanks,” Cole said. Drawing it, he found it a tad longer than his previous Jumping Sword, and a little heavier. He would have to experiment with it and make sure it worked as well as his other one.

“The talking castle has not yet departed the sky,” Wenzel said. “Only a few hours remain before it passes out of reach. If one of you wants to scout it, Adam gave me permission to take you there aboard the *Vulture*.”

“Did you see it?” Jace asked.

“We visited yesterday,” Wenzel said. “Strange hearing a castle speak. It promised vast treasures and secrets. We got plenty curious. Never saw the scout again once he went inside. The temperament of the castle changed when we left.



It sounded angry. I won't bring the *Vulture* very near. If you insist on a close look, you'll be on your own."

Jace shook his head at Cole.

"We better hurry," Cole said. "Sounds like time is short."

\* \* \*

Violet had spent the first part of the flight exploring the *Vulture*, fingering ropes, peeking into lifeboats, and asking the crew questions. Now she stood at the front of the skycraft as the desired castle drew nearer. The Eastern Cloudwall loomed not too far in the distance.

Nearby, Jace adjusted the straps of Cole's parachute. "Do you remember why you have this?" Jace asked.

"Of course I do," Cole said.

"You have it because the horrors inside that castle might be worse than jumping into a bottomless sky and hoping somebody can get under you before you fall forever."

"Unlike you, I've used a parachute to escape before," Cole reminded him.

"I wouldn't brag about that," Jace said. "It's good to survive a close call. But the scouts who have too many close calls end up dead."

"I know the dangers," Cole said.

Jace touched the little vial around Cole's neck. "Remember what this holds?"

"Poison, so I can end my misery if I end up falling and nobody can catch me."

"If you fall below the range where the floatstones work, you will never see anyone else again."

"And poison might be better than starving while falling endlessly."

"Does suicide poison seem like something you should bring along when doing something voluntary?"

"I'm not doing it for fun, Jace. I'm doing it to get info about Ramarro. I'll talk to the castle first. I won't even go inside unless it sounds like what we need."

Jace sighed. "You're determined?"

"You know I am."

"Then I'm coming too," Jace said. He walked away and came back, shrugging into his own parachute.

"You don't have to join me," Cole said.

"I'm going if you are," Jace said firmly.

“Should I wear one?” Violet asked.

“They’re for people who are coming,” Cole said.

Violet put her hands on her hips. “I’m not coming?”

“It’s dangerous,” Cole said.

“I heard,” Violet replied. “Won’t it be less dangerous if you can open a way and escape whenever you want?”

Cole and Jace looked at each other.

“Yes,” Jace said. “That would actually be much less dangerous.”

“Might also be easier to get to the castle using a wayport rather than a lifeboat,” Violet suggested.

Cole swallowed. “True.”

“But should I wear a parachute in case you get killed, Cole, and I can’t open a wayport?”

“I’ll grab one,” Jace said, hurrying off.

Cole looked down at the approaching castle. Composed of weathered gray stone, the huge building looked long abandoned. Bulky towers added height to the outer wall, while more artful towers topped the soaring buildings within.

“Looks ominous,” Cole said.

“Looks empty,” Violet replied. “I wonder how it talks.”

“Are you sure you want to go down there?” Cole said. “We really could die. It looks quiet right now, but visitors get killed in these castles all the time. Opening a wayport could save us. Or we could get crushed or poisoned or stabbed or shot before a wayport can be opened.”

“You’re a terrible recruiter,” Violet said. “I knew there would be danger when Queen Harmony assigned me to you. Having me along improves our chances for success. I’m part of this mission.”

Jace returned with a parachute for Violet and poison to wear around her neck. Captain Wenzel joined them. They all leaned slightly to compensate as the *Vulture* drifted to a stop.

“Jace tells me you can open a wayport to the castle,” Wenzel said. “And another to get back. Is such a miracle possible?”

“It’s a little-known technique for traveling short distances,” she replied. “Lets me open many wayports without the usual recovery time needed. Something I am beginning to master.”

“I wish we had that talent with us every day,” Wenzel said. “If your technique will work, I see no purpose in drawing any closer to the destination.”

“The boys will need you if I get killed,” Violet said.

“Aye,” Wenzel agreed. “We’ll linger and keep a lifeboat standing ready in case a rescue is needed.”

“Thanks,” Cole said, casually touching Violet’s hand and energizing her power. “We hope to be back soon. Right away if the castle doesn’t seem promising.”

“Don’t take too long,” Wenzel warned. “We won’t bring the skycraft too near the cloudwall. You don’t want to be in the castle when it gets there. Things quickly get out of control.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Jace suggested.

Violet opened a wayport.

Jace nodded at Cole. “Die bravely.”

“Die bravely,” Cole replied as his friend stepped through, golden rope in hand.

Gripping the hilt of his Jumping Sword, Cole followed.

## CHAPTER

# 8

## CASTLE

**B**attle-scarred walls loomed imposingly above Cole as he arrived beside Jace. With the massive drawbridge closed, the castle appeared unassailable. The only handholds on the ancient wall were narrow slits for archers that began forty feet up.

Cole could not take his eyes off the colossal structure. Its menacing presence demanded attention. There was no obvious threat—no defenders manned the parapets, no sound issued from within. So why did he suddenly feel like a rodent cowering in the shadow of a hawk?

Cole peripherally sensed Violet emerge from the wayport and close it.

The three of them gazed up at the castle. Was it staring back? Cole could identify no eyes, but he felt seen.

“What now?” Jace asked quietly.

“Not sure,” Cole said. It seemed inappropriate to talk. He wasn’t even sure he should blink.

They continued to stare.

“Does it know we’re here?” Violet eventually whispered.

Without any proof, Cole nodded.

The castle remained still.

“Hello?” Jace called.

Cole flinched at the volume. The word fell flat, swallowed by the silence.

“We’re not alone,” Jace muttered.

“Could you have transported us into the courtyard?” Cole asked.

“The courtyard is protected by walls,” Violet said. “Wayminders don’t trespass.”

“Does that have to include empty castles made by magic clouds?” Jace asked.

“Didn’t we want to make sure the castle was worth entering?” Violet replied.

“Hard to tell from out here,” Jace complained.

An enormous voice emanated from the castle, resonant and deep, loud without straining. “ENTER IF YOU DARE.”

Cole felt the voice in his chest as well as heard it with his ears. He glanced at his friends. Both appeared uncertain.

“How would we enter?” Cole asked.

The drawbridge swung outward, chains unspooling noisily, until it thudded heavily against the ground. A portcullis behind the drawbridge raised high enough for a person to duck beneath it. Then all became silent again.

“Should we go in?” Jace asked.

Cole studied the castle suspiciously. “I’m not sure about this.”

“TREASURES UNTOLD AWAIT,” the penetrating voice said.

“What treasures?” Cole asked.

“RICHES BEYOND IMAGINATION,” the voice said. “SECRETS OF CREON. MYSTERIES OF THE TORIVOR RAMARRO.”

“Tell us about the mysteries,” Cole said. “Tell us about Ramarro.”

“HE WHO DESIRES THE TREASURE MUST ENTER,” the voice asserted.

After drawing his Jumping Sword, Cole touched Violet with his free hand and made sure their connection was strong. “Stay ready.”

She gave a nod.

Cole reached for Jace’s rope.

“Sambria, remember?” Jace said, expanding his rope slightly and twirling it. “Works fine here.”

“I forgot,” Cole said.

“Time to die bravely,” Jace said, striding forward.

The castle remained still and silent as they approached the drawbridge. Was it actually a bridge if it spanned no moat or trench? When they stepped onto the drawbridge, the voice spoke again.

“TRESSPASSERS NOT INTENDED TO RECEIVE THE TREASURE MUST SURELY PERISH.”

Cole paused. The others looked at him. “We’re going after Ramarro,” he said. “Dandalus knows that. Let’s hope this is meant for us.”

“And if not,” Violet said, “I’ll open a wayport back to the skycraft.”

Cole, Jace, and Violet crossed the rest of the drawbridge and ducked under the portcullis together. They had not taken more than a step beyond it before

the portcullis crashed down. Quick as a mousetrap, the drawbridge slammed shut with thunderous finality.

“This treasure better be good,” Jace muttered.

They proceeded into the abandoned courtyard, the vast castle before them, the wall behind and around them. No signs of life disturbed the stillness. And yet Cole felt sure they were not alone. He kept checking over his shoulders, turning as he walked.

“I don’t see an entrance to the castle,” Cole said.

Up ahead, a flight of steps led to a blank wall. No doors into the castle were in view. The lower levels had no windows.

“I see balconies,” Jace said.

“Now that we’re inside will you open a wayport?” Cole asked.

“Into the castle?” Violet asked. “I don’t feel good about that. In fact, the interior of the building feels shielded from my mind. Somebody took measures to keep Wayminders out. But I could now go anywhere in the courtyard, including a balcony.”

“Do it,” Cole said, maintaining his connection to her power without physical contact.

“SURVIVE THE TRIAL TO OBTAIN THE REWARD,” the voice declared.

An oval disturbance appeared near Cole. He stepped through onto a large balcony high above the courtyard. Jace and Violet promptly joined him.

A door led from the balcony into the castle.

For an instant.

Then the surrounding wall swallowed the door. The portal vanished without a trace, leaving only stone blocks. The wall also filled in the nearby windows.

“This might be harder than it—” Jace began.

Without warning the balcony detached from the side of the castle and plummeted toward the courtyard.

Cole separated from the balcony in the air before he could kick off it with his Jumping Sword. He watched in shocked terror as he plunged toward the ground. Without someplace to jump from, his sword was useless. The golden rope snaked around him, pulling him close to Jace and Violet. While one end of the rope bound them together, the other stretched to the balustrades of a different balcony, and suddenly they were swinging instead of falling.

The detached balcony smashed below them as the threesome swooped sideways, angling downward at first, then curving upward with terrific speed.

The golden rope went limp as the balcony to which it was attached broke from the castle as well. Once again Cole and his friends were sailing through the air. Still holding them together, the golden rope spiraled beneath them into the form of an enormous spring that absorbed the impact and deposited them safely onto the ground. Off to one side, the second balcony crashed to the courtyard in an explosion of shattered stone.

“Thanks, Jace,” Cole said. “We were goners.”

“Don’t relax yet,” Jace warned.

Statues were detaching from the castle, stepping fully carved out of the stone walls like divers emerging from deep water. The life-size men, women, and children left behind no holes or indentations, and no carvings hinted at their presence before their arrival. Each of the statues carried a stone weapon—mostly clubs, swords, and spears. Cole could not tell whether the stone personages had waited fully formed within the walls and were now passing through the barriers, or if the castle was spontaneously creating them, but all the stone people moved quickly toward him and his friends.

“No fair,” Cole said, retreating away from the castle.

The statues went from walking fast to running, stone faces contorting in anger. Cole turned and ran toward the outer wall only to find much larger statues emerging from the soaring fortification, four and five times the height of a man. A bearded giant with a huge war hammer paced toward him, footsteps shaking the ground.

Jace used his golden rope to pick up the statue of a knight and heave it into the statue of a hooded monk. The monk went flying, and the knight lost his head and one arm. Then Jace bashed the damaged knight into a shepherdess with a stone crook. With a resounding crash, she went down as the knight broke in half.

Cole saw that fighting would not solve this problem. They were drastically outnumbered. Running would not work for long either. Dozens of statues were converging on them from all directions. More continued to surface from the ground and emerge from the walls.

“Should we go?” Violet cried.

Jace used his rope to whip the feet out from under the nearest statues as quickly as he could. The disruption was not enough. There were too many. Cole and his friends would be overrun any moment.

Cole still felt a solid connection to Violet’s power. “We should probably go.”

A wall sprang up out of the ground, dividing him from Violet. Another separated him from Jace, trapping Cole in a narrow alley. Statues closed in from ahead and behind.

He glanced up. The sudden walls were about twenty feet high. Cole pointed at the top of the nearest and shouted, "Away!" He jumped, and the sword pulled him upward. His momentum died at the top of the wall, allowing him to land lightly.

The top of the wall was only about six inches wide. Despite landing gently, Cole lost his balance. Pointing to a spot in the courtyard well beyond the mob of statues, Cole yelled "Away" and kicked off the wall before he lost contact. He streaked through the air toward his destination. The sword decelerated him right before he landed, but Cole still stumbled. Jumping down tended to be more jarring than jumping up.

He had practiced with the new Jumping Sword back at Skyport. The range was similar to his previous Jumping Sword, meaning he could spring to the lower balconies of the nearby castle with a single bound, but the tops of the towers were well out of reach without multiple jumps.

Many of the statues turned to charge Cole. Several of the new statues emerging from the walls came his way as well. A statue of a huge barbarian woman dressed in animal skins detached from the outer wall and stalked toward him, a chain mace in her mighty grip.

Cole saw the golden rope uncoil like a giant spring to propel Jace away from the attacking statues. Jace landed nimbly and used the rope to yank the foot of a giant statue, noisily toppling the brute. A new wall sprang up, blocking his friend from view.

Cole could still feel his connection to Violet and kept pushing energy to her power, but he worried how she was handling the statues. If he felt their connection, she had to be alive. But was she being apprehended or injured? Would she open a way and flee to outside the castle? Had she fled already?

"Over here!" Violet called from across the courtyard. The shimmering wayport beside her vanished, another opened, and one appeared beside Cole as well. Violet stepped into the new wayport and emerged beside Cole.

"Should we go?" she asked.

"We have to get Jace," Cole said.

A wall shot up between them.

Statues were closing in, so Cole sprang to the top of the wall, landing the



jump this time. Looking over the far side, he saw Violet disappear into a wayport just before the statues arrived. New walls erupted at unpredictable intervals, partitioning the courtyard into a labyrinth.

Did the castle know Violet was a Wayminder? Or did it just generally try to separate groups?

The female statue with the chain mace stood tall enough to still reach Cole. He jumped away an instant before the spiked ball smashed the top of the wall into fragments. Cole knew he would have too much momentum to land his jump to the top of the next wall, so he shouted “Away” again as he sprang off the next surface he touched, aiming for the ground this time.

As Cole staggered to a stop, Jace yelled, “The castle!”

Unable to see what his friend meant, and with more statues racing at him, Cole sprang to the top of another wall and, pivoting at his waist, arms extended, managed to keep his balance. He promptly realized that a pair of open doors had appeared at the top of the steps at the front of the castle. They had not been there before.

Jace used the rope to slingshot himself in that direction. Cole could feel each time Violet opened a wayport as her power required more energy. For the first time it was becoming an effort to sustain her.

Cole thrust his sword at the top of a wall halfway to the front doors of the castle and shouted, “Away!” He yelled the command again as he landed, skipping onward to the top of the steps.

Jace arrived a moment before him. After Cole landed, a wayport opened, and Violet appeared beside him. Beyond the open doors stretched an empty hall.

“Do we go in?” Violet asked, panting, her hair even wilder than normal.

The walls in the courtyard sank into the ground, allowing an enormous mob of statues, big and small, to charge directly at them. Cole was unsure what to do. With Violet and Jace beside him, it presented a chance for all of them to escape through a wayport. But did the open doors mean they were passing the test? Was the valuable information about Ramarro down that hallway? Or was the castle simply herding them in that direction to destroy them?

“Come on,” Cole said, rushing through the doors.

Jace and Violet sprinted beside him.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Jace said.

“Me too,” Cole replied. “Be ready to make a wayport out of here, Violet.”

“I can’t see in here,” Violet said. “Or out of here. Just like how I couldn’t see

in from outside.”

“Try,” Cole said, flooding power into her.

“I am, Cole,” Violet said. “My mind is blind in here! I’m trying! I can’t open a way if I can’t see.”

Glancing back, Cole saw the mob of statues clattering after them. He and his friends raced up a stairway at the end of the hall, then rushed along another corridor. Statues began to emerge from the walls at either side and behind them. All the doors up ahead disappeared, including where the corridor came to an end.

“No fair!” Cole yelled. This wasn’t a trial! This was certain death!

They reached the end of the hall and turned to face the oncoming statues. Instead of running, the statues walked briskly, packed close together, with more pouring from the walls.

“We need a wayport, now,” Cole said, feeding Violet all the power he could muster.

“Stop!” Violet shouted, blood leaking from one nostril. “I can’t!”

A brawny bald statue with a club in each hand led the attackers. Dozens followed—soldiers, dancers, barbarians, demons, fancy ladies, scholars, and cherubs marched together, weapons ready, expressions confident.

Jace raised his arm, and his golden rope unfurled toward the statues, but before it reached them, a huge hand sprouted from the wall and took hold of it. The rope writhed as Jace tried to wrest it free, but the stone hand held it firmly.

In desperation, Cole summoned his power for a final effort and reached out to the brawny statue at the head of the others. To his surprise, his power connected easily. With an effort of will, Cole blasted the statue into shrapnel that showered the statues in its wake.

The statues all stopped.

Reaching out, Cole could feel all of them. It was like in the echolands. No, even easier than the echolands. He could connect with almost no effort.

Had he been able to do this all along?

Up until now, in the physical world, he had only managed to connect to the power inside other people and to the power within shaped artifacts. He had not tried to connect to anything physical since arriving at the sky castle. He had assumed that he couldn’t do it.

He had been wrong.

The mass of statues rushed forward in a desperate charge.

With a growl, Cole threw everything he had at them, and the first couple dozen statues exploded down the corridor in a hail of shattered stone. The surviving statues farther back kept coming, and Cole reached out, feeling them with his power, and then hurling them violently away.

The walls of the hallway began to constrict, closing in, the ceiling descending, the floor elevating. Cole felt the walls, ceiling, and floor with his power and shoved them away, finding them easily malleable. He quickly increased the size of the corridor threefold. The remaining statues melted into the floor and walls.

The corridor became empty. The castle was still.

Jace stared at Cole in amazement.

“Who are you?” Violet asked in an awed tone.

“My power works here like it did in the echolands,” Cole said. “I didn’t know until I tried in desperation.”

A statue emerged from the end of the corridor. Cole reached into it with his power and then paused. The statue carried no weapon. And was smiling.

And looked exactly like Dandalus.

CHAPTER  
— 9 —  
TREASURE

The statue spoke with a smaller version of the voice that had issued from the castle. “Well done. The defenses have disengaged. You’re safe now.”

“Dandalus?” Cole asked.

“A simplified version of Dandalus, yes, with some specific information. Since you survived, I presume you are Cole Randolph?”

“I am,” Cole said.

“I recognize you. From the echolands, the echo of Dandalus created this castle to send you a message. The message is meant only for you, Cole, so Dandalus created defenses that should be able to vanquish any intruder, but that you could easily overcome.”

“Easy once I knew how my power worked here,” Cole said.

“Was it a challenge?” the statue asked. “This castle was specifically customized to accommodate your abilities.”

“Did you miss the falling balconies?” Jace asked with a dark chuckle. “And the horde of statues?”

“Two artificial consciousnesses abide here. One controls the defenses. The other is me. The defenses did not give me access to you until I emerged from the wall.”

“I’m glad we found you,” Cole said.

“Too bad for the scout who came before us,” Jace murmured.

“There is one other living person inside the castle,” the statue said. “Could this be your scout? The defenses only kill as a final resort. The primary directive is to capture. The castle is designed to prevent escape. Of course, anyone captured would die with the castle when it enters the Eastern Cloudwall and is unmade.”

“The scout is alive?” Cole asked.

“We have a single young human in one of the holding cells. I can take you to him now or after our conversation.”

“How about the information first?” Cole prompted.

“The echo of Dandalus became concerned when he realized Ramarro was sent to Creon,” the statue said. “There are certain secrets he withheld from the artificial construct of himself residing in the Founding Stone. And many subtle nuances he worried the construct would not understand. One of these secrets is that through their skills in manipulating time, the Grand Shapers of Creon learned the key to everlasting life as long as they never leave Creon.”

“I’ve heard rumors,” Violet said. “None confirmed. Wait, we’ve had many different Grand Shapers in Creon. If they can live forever, why would we need more than one?”

“They retire,” the statue said. “Go into hiding. Partly because the duties of a Grand Shaper are taxing, and those who hold the office eventually wear out. Partly so their discovery of a form of immortality can remain hidden. Dandalus knew the secret but didn’t want it getting out.”

“They can’t leave Creon?” Cole asked.

“Time Jumpers can only manipulate time inside of Creon,” Violet explained. “Time manipulations can’t survive beyond the borders of the kingdom.”

“Time Jumpers?” Cole asked.

“Highly specialized Wayminders who can shape time itself,” Violet clarified. “I hope to be one someday.”

“You can shape time?” Jace asked.

“Me?” Violet asked. “Inside of Creon? Just a little. So I’m told. But a little means I have potential. Not all Wayminders do.”

“Can the Grand Shapers of Creon help us?” Cole asked.

“Dandalus wants you to seek out Lorenzo Debray,” the statue said.

“He was Grand Shaper more than four hundred years ago!” Violet exclaimed.

“I hope he has a sturdy cane,” Jace said.

“You should be able to find him some distance north of the old cache at Shepherd’s Grove,” the statue said.

Violet looked like she was ready to freak out.

“What?” Cole asked.

“He just told us Lorenzo Debray is alive and where to find him,” Violet gushed.

“Lorenzo knows more about the vault holding Ramarro than anyone but

Kendo Rattan, who created it. Dandalus also recommended you seek out Kendo Rattan, though he is unsure where he is hiding or if he still lives.”

“Kendo Rattan,” Violet said reverently. “The father of our order. The first and greatest Grand Shaper of Creon—a master Wayminder and expert Time Jumper.”

“What else?” Cole asked.

“Beware the Ancient One,” the statue said. “He has allied with evil across the ages in Creon, and is a probable candidate to support Ramarro.”

Violet shivered. “The Ancient One killed one of our Grand Shapers years ago.”

“Hard to live forever if you get killed,” Jace said.

“No mortal is truly immortal,” Violet said. “Some are just really good at stretching it.”

“True,” the statue said. “The Grand Shapers of Creon are not invulnerable—but they have learned to live indefinitely if nobody interferes.”

“How old is the Ancient One?” Cole asked.

“At least fifteen hundred years,” the statue said.

“He hides his face,” Violet said. “Some people theorize he might be more than one person.”

“What do you think?” Cole asked the statue.

“I have no information about the theory,” the statue said. “Dandalus primarily wanted me to urge you to seek out Lorenzo Debray. He may be able to help you prepare defenses against Ramarro.”

“Thanks,” Cole said.

“Dandalus was sorry he couldn’t get you this information earlier,” the statue said. “He would have told you this before you left the echolands had he known Ramarro would end up incarcerated in Creon. This was the first castle he sent with a message. He intends to send more, every few days, hoping eventually you would intercept one.”

“Lucky that we came to Skyport for a Jumping Sword,” Cole said.

“Dandalus thought you might, since you had to leave yours behind when you crossed back to physical Necronum. He also hoped that with multiple castles professing information about Ramarro you would eventually get word of the phenomenon.”

“But we found the first castle,” Jace said.

“Correct,” the statue said.

“Where did Dandalus go to make this castle?” Cole asked. “Where in the echolands do the castles come from?”

“I lack that information,” the statue said.

“Can you guess?” Cole asked.

The statue gave a small smile. “I was made to deliver certain information and to have some semblance of a personality. I only know what I know.”

“Do you know anything else about Ramarro?” Jace asked.

“Only that Dandalus urges you to hurry,” the statue said. “The Void will not hold him very long. You must investigate if a better prison can be devised. Should the torivor get free, there may be no stopping him.”

“You mentioned another person alive inside the castle,” Cole said.

“Yes,” the statue said. “I will take you to him.”

The statue turned, and the wall parted, opening into a stairway. Cole, Jace, and Violet followed the statue until they reached a barred cell. A boy perhaps a year or two older than Cole waited inside, skinny with black hair.

“You’re a scout?” Jace asked.

“Yeah, with the Sky Raiders,” he said.

“I’m Jace. This is Cole and Violet. And a statue.”

“I’m Trotter,” the boy said.

“I’m a former Sky Raider,” Jace said. “So is Cole. Today you get a free pass. Want to get out of here?”

“Really?” Trotter asked. “How’d you beat all the statues?”

“Cole has some shaping tricks,” Jace said. “What was your item?”

“A boomerang,” Trotter said. “Always came back, no matter how terrible the throw or how much I moved. A statue caught it and broke it.”

“Anything else we should know before we go?” Cole asked the statue.

“You have the message,” the statue said.

“What message?” Trotter asked.

“Be glad you don’t have to worry about it,” Jace said.

“Do we need to go outside?” Cole asked Violet.

“I’m not sure,” Violet said. “My power went dead when you blasted those statues.”

Cole hadn’t consciously noticed breaking the connection. “Right,” he said, touching her hand.

“I can see our way out now,” Violet said. “The defenses are down. Back to the *Vulture*?”

“We should let Wenzel know we made it,” Jace said.

The bars of the cell retracted into the floor.

A shimmering distortion appeared.

“Is that a wayport?” Trotter asked.

“She’s a Wayminder,” Jace said.

“But she can’t open a wayport here,” Trotter said. “Not in Sambria.”

Jace hushed him, a finger to his lips. “Don’t tell her.”

“Thanks,” Cole said to the statue.

The replica of Dandalus gave a nod.

Cole stepped through onto the deck of the *Vulture*. The others joined him, and the wayport closed.

“Is that Trotter?” Wenzel exclaimed. Several other members of the crew shouted welcomes.

“Sorry it took me so long,” Trotter said with a wave.

“We assumed you were long gone,” Wenzel said.

“I was locked up,” Trotter said.

“We should go right to Skyport,” Cole told Violet.

A wayport opened.

Jace placed a hand on Trotter’s shoulder. “Come with us. I have an idea.”

They all went through. This time Violet had placed the wayport not far from the entrance to Skyport. The four of them hurried into the common room.

“Back already?” Adam boomed. “And ahead of the *Vulture*! Bless my beard, is that Trotter? What were the chances? Good to see you, lad. Cole, I trust you found what you were looking for?”

“Yes, thanks,” Cole said.

“I’m laying claim to Trotter,” Jace said.

Cole’s eyebrows shot up. He hadn’t thought of the idea, but it was a good one—a chance to free another boy from this dangerous life.

Adam sniffed and shifted on his throne. “Listen, pup, I paid good money for Trotter. He has now finished twenty missions even. Thirty remain before he moves up from scout.”

“We don’t work for you,” Jace said. “The crew of the *Vulture* left him behind. We salvaged him.”

Adam scowled. “The Sky Raiders had a claim to that castle.”

“I didn’t see a flag,” Jace said. “The claim is lost when a castle is abandoned.”

“You got to the castle on one of my vessels,” Adam protested, sounding less



certain.

“Actually, after the *Vulture* brought us near, we arrived and got home without your skycraft,” Jace said. “No claim was made for the Sky Raiders when we visited the castle this time. Not a single Sky Raider set foot on the property. And we had no agreement with you to share salvage.”

Adam frowned and nodded. “Valid points. Seeing as how Cole is helping with financial reparations from the High King, I’ll concede the issue. Trotter, you are proof that fortune can turn. You now belong to these three.”

“And I don’t believe in slavery,” Jace said. “Adam, can you have his slavemark canceled?”

“I can arrange that.”

Trotter looked astonished. “Really? I’m free? Just like that?”

“You’re welcome,” Jace said.

Cole looked at Jace, impressed. It felt good to know they had freed a slave. Really good. Cole quietly resolved to look for the chance to free more.

Trotter glanced at Adam. “Do you mind if I stay on as a free partner?”

“Partner takes time,” Adam said. “But if you want to continue as a free raider or as a hired hand, the door is open.”

Trotter raised both fists. “Yes! I can’t believe it!” He turned to Cole, Jace, and Violet. “How can I ever thank you? I was doomed. Now . . . I have a brand-new life. I’m forever in your debt.”

Jace looked around the common room. “I know this place seems like everything right now, but keep in mind there is an enormous world out there. And you are free to explore it. Enjoy it while you can.”

“Thanks for the tip about the castle,” Cole said to Adam. “It will help our cause. And thanks for the sword.”

“Always happy to do business,” Adam said.

“Where to now?” Violet wondered.

“Do you know a village called Kasori?” Cole asked. “In Elloweer?”

“Sure,” Violet said. “A grinaldi village. That seems obscure.”

“I want to catch up with an old friend,” Cole said. He took her hand.

Violet opened a wayport.

Jace waved at Adam. “Stop exploiting children.”

Then he stepped through.

## CHAPTER

# 10

## TWITCH

**F**rom the moment Cole stepped out of the wayport, he could see why Twitch had missed his home. Sunlight shone from a mostly clear sky onto a pastoral blend of fields and groves. The dwellings were simple but tidy—the stone houses on the ground, the wooden ones on stilts or in the largest trees. Neat gardens adjoined the dwellings, many with fruit trees, and one large wheat field was in view.

“What devilry is this?” cried a cranky voice as Violet closed the wayport. “Strangers stepping out of thin air! With the swamp folk, are you? Explain yourselves!”

The complainer was a scrawny old man almost a head shorter than Cole with a sparse white beard and the legs of a grasshopper. Just like Twitch, a pair of antennae projected from his forehead. He shook a knobby walking stick in their direction to punctuate his words.

“We’re friends,” Cole said, raising empty hands.

“A friend wearing a sword,” the old man spat. “Marauders more likely. You better turn tail and magic yourselves away afore our knight gets wind of you. Chop you down to size, he will.”

“We like the grinaldi,” Cole insisted. “We’re friends with Twitch! I mean, Ruben. Do you know Ruben?”

The crinkly scowl deepened. “Do I know Ruben? I practically raised the boy! The lad did chores for me. Mostly paid him in apple butter and sweet cakes. Don’t speak that name like it proves anything. Everyone in the region wants to be friends with Ruben. Big hero. Who doesn’t want to join a parade? Be part of the fun?”

“We’ve known him for a while,” Cole said.

“Bah!” the man said. “I knew him afore he opened his eyes! Never seen any of you around here before. Especially when times were ugly. I reckon you’re scavengers at best.”

“We helped him find Minimus,” Cole said politely. “The little knight.”

“Don’t start underestimating little,” the old man warned, shaking his stick again. “Is that a jab at me? I can still outjump any ten humans, big or small.”

Jace stepped forward. “Do you know where we can find Ruben?”

“Now we’re getting to it,” the old man said, taking a couple hops backward. “Assassins, are you? Come to destroy our deliverer?”

“We really are good friends with Ruben,” Cole said. “He met us during his wanderings. We helped each other. He’ll vouch for us.”

The old man shook his head. “Strangers that appear asking questions ought to disappear twice as quickly. Our knight will cut you down faster than a bee sting.”

A female grinaldi hopped into view, landing near the old man. Young, slender, and pretty, she looked no older than Violet. “You be polite, Granddad. They answered your questions patiently.”

The old man grunted. “Polite? I saw what polite got us with the swamp folk! Got us kicked out of our homes and working our own land like slaves.”

“These aren’t swamp folk,” she said. “You can see that.”

“Worse than swamp folk, if you ask me,” the old man said, looking them up and down. “Swamp ghosts, appearing out of empty air. Swamp wizards come for vengeance.”

“Do you think ghosts would stand there taking all this abuse from you?” the girl asked. “Or wizards? Or assassins?”

“That’s how they get you,” the old man griped. “Lure you in with honey. You reach out a hand of fellowship, and they stick in the knife.”

“Or they are polite friends of Ruben inquiring after him,” the girl said.

“Bah,” the old man grunted, turning away. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Looking around, Cole noticed several grinaldi coming out of hiding. They appeared around tree trunks, rose out of fields, and peered out of windows.

“I’m Chuli,” the girl said. “First time in Kasori?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “We really are just looking for Ruben.”

“Look how many there are!” Jace exclaimed, turning around. “Did you all hide when I came through? Or were you already hiding?”

“We took cover when we saw the air turn funny,” Chuli said. “Then you

appeared.”

“That was fast,” Jace said. “No wonder Twitch—I mean, Ruben—likes to hide. You guys are experts.”

“You can find Ruben at the Wallows,” Chuli said.

“We don’t know where—” Cole began.

“Down the main village road, past the central storehouse on the left,” Violet piped up.

“That’s right,” Chuli said.

“Really?” Jace asked.

Violet shrugged. “It was on the map.”

“You have a map of Kasori?” Jace asked.

“The Wayminder archives do.” Violet tapped her temple. “Good memory.”

“I can guide you,” Chuli offered.

“Okay,” Cole said.

She led them to a little lane and turned down it, passing dwellings on the ground and in trees. They saw no other grinaldi.

“Is everyone hiding?” Jace asked.

“We were careful about strangers before the swamp folk took over,” Chuli said. “Our oppressors might be gone, but if anything, we’re even more cautious than before. You don’t have to fight what can’t find you.”

“Doesn’t that leave your homes vulnerable?” Jace asked.

“Minimus has been training us how to attack out of hiding,” Chuli said. “It plays to our strengths. Much more effective than direct aggression.”

“Are the swamp folk completely gone?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Chuli said. “The big battle happened here in Kasori after Minimus defeated Renford Poleman, their champion. Renford’s knights from other villages came after Minimus until none were left. The surviving swamp folk returned to their rafts, and Minimus became champion of all our villages.”

“So things are good now?” Cole asked.

Chuli did her best to smile. “So much better than it was.” She looked away. “But many of our people were lost in the fighting.”

Up ahead appeared a large, low building made of mortared stone.

“The storehouse?” Jace asked.

“The Wallows is just a little farther,” Chuli said.

Beyond the storehouse they left the lane for a trail. Cole began to notice a new humidity in the air along with the rich smell of damp earth. As they passed

through a stand of trees, several large pools of dark mud came into view. Some had puddles on the surface. Heat radiated from the nearest, and steam rose from a few. Several grinaldi waded or lounged in two of the larger mud pools.

“Hot springs?” Cole asked.

“Mud springs,” Jace corrected.

“The Wallows,” Chuli said with a smile. “The most relaxing haven in all the villages.”

Violet scrunched her face. “It looks filthy.”

“Of course,” Chuli said.

“What’s relaxing about filthy?” Violet asked.

“You’ll know if you try it,” Chuli assured her. “Ruben is this way, in the Governor’s Wallow. It’s reserved for the aldermen.”

“Ruben is an alderman?” Cole asked.

“More or less,” Chuli said. “As champion, Minimus appoints the aldermen. Ruben is his first knight. In some ways that makes him more powerful than the aldermen. And he’s younger than I am!”

“Scrawnier too,” Jace said.

“And he’s saved our lives more than once,” Cole said pointedly.

“Here we are,” Chuli said, speaking more quietly.

Broad-leafed plants ringed the mud pool where Twitch reclined. Nestled within a smaller and deeper pit than the others, this wallow had the blackest, slickest mud and the most pungent smell. Twitch rested near the bottom, alone, at the edge of where the mud pool leveled out, pink flower petals over his eyes. Only his chest, arms, and head remained above the muck. A female grinaldi climbed out of the pit carrying an empty cup, grasshopper legs muddy to the thighs.

“Did she just bring him a drink?” Jace murmured.

“This is the fanciest wallow,” Chuli whispered.

The woman emerging from the wallow approached them, eyeing Cole, Jace, and Violet uncertainly. “Access to this wallow is by invitation only.”

“Twitch is our friend,” Cole said quietly. “I mean Ruben. Can we surprise him?”

“The first knight needs time to meditate and relax,” the woman insisted. “There is a protocol to—”

“Hey, Twitch!” Jace called, stripping off his shirt.

Rolling over, Twitch wiped the petals off his face and looked up. His eyes

brightened. “Jace! Cole! What are you doing here?”

“We didn’t want you to be the only one lazing around in the mud,” Jace said, unlacing his shoes.

“I’m sorry, Lord Ruben,” the woman apologized.

“No need,” Twitch said. “These are my friends! Come on in!”

“Looks like you can take it from here,” Chuli told Cole.

“Thanks,” Cole replied. He turned to Violet. “Want to go in?”

She stared at the dark mud in horror. “Why?”

“Warm and squishy,” Jace said, yanking off his pants. Clad only in his undershorts, he jumped from the edge, plunging into the mud almost to his thighs. Scrambling forward, Jace plopped down by Twitch, splattering him.

Cole started taking off his shoes. “Looks kind of fun.”

“Yep!” Jace confirmed. “Warm and squishy!”

“I’ll just . . . stay dressed,” Violet said. “And, you know, relatively clean.”

Cole felt a little embarrassed stripping down to his underwear, but Jace had set the example, and he didn’t love the idea of ruining his clothes. He waded down into the warm mud, feeling it slurp between his toes, first sinking to his shins, then to his knees. Toward the bottom of the pit the mud got soupier, and he sank almost to his waist.

“Hey, Cole,” Twitch said. “Don’t go in farther or you might get stuck. Plus, it gets a little too hot out toward the center. Come relax at the edge of the deep part.”

Cole settled in on the opposite side of Twitch from Jace, resting his shoulders on an incline of firm mud. The goopier mud covered him halfway up his chest, warm but not hot. “You’re missing out,” Cole called up to Violet.

“I’m going to let you have all the fun this time,” Violet said.

“She’s a Wayminder?” Twitch asked.

“Only way to travel,” Jace said.

Twitch started blinking and gave a weak smile. “She can’t travel from here, though.”

“Actually she can,” Cole said. “When I energize her with my power, she can open ways anywhere.”

Twitch blinked faster, and his lips quivered a bit. “No kidding? So, you guys aren’t dead, huh?”

“Lots of near misses,” Jace said. “Zeropolis was bad. Necronum even worse. And we just barely survived a sky castle. Made me think of you.”

“Sky castle?” Twitch asked. “Why would you return to the Brink?”

“I needed a new Jumping Sword,” Cole said. “Then we got talked into checking out a castle. We ended up with some good info.”

“And now you’re here,” Twitch said, still blinking a lot.

“We wanted to check up on you,” Jace said. “Make sure you were getting plenty of toasty mud baths while we were off risking our necks.”

“I saw some fighting too,” Twitch said.

“I heard Minimus defeated Renford, and you guys drove out the swamp folk,” Cole said.

Twitch shivered. “It was quite a battle. At least we won.”

“Zig told me you helped rally the grinaldi,” Cole said. “You dropped Renford’s brother.”

Twitch jerked in surprise. “Wait, Zig? How did you talk to Zig? He died not long after the battle.”

“I was in the echolands,” Cole said. “I met his echo and got news about you.”

Twitch gave an impressed whistle. “Really? The echolands? You *have* been traveling. How was Zig?”

“Well, you know, dead,” Cole said. “But otherwise he seemed well. He was in a place reserved for heroes.”

“Was it a mud pit?” Jace asked.

“A little cleaner,” Cole said. “Where’s Minimus?”

“Wenachi,” Twitch said. “He travels between the villages. Makes sure things run smoothly. Trains fighters. He takes his job as champion seriously. Minimus told me the grinaldi feel like the family he never had. I didn’t know if he would want to stay on after the trouble was over, but for now he seems really content.”

“Not as content as you lounging in the mud all day,” Jace said.

Twitch gave a guilty smile. “I don’t just do this. I sometimes help Minimus train our fighters. I lead gathering expeditions. Everyone has been really good to me since we kicked out the swamp folk, but sometimes the attention becomes a little much.” He lowered his voice. “The Wallows are warm and cozy, but I mostly come here to hide.”

“Attention from who?” Jace asked, splashing some mud at Twitch. “The ladies?”

Twitch’s antennae quivered, and he hunkered lower in the mud. “A little, yeah, even though I’m too young for all that. Just everyone. I have aldermen asking for my advice. Farmers wanting my opinion. I brought a knight who

kicked out the swamp folk. That doesn't make me an expert in harvests or planting or managing a village."

"So you fake it," Jace said. "Leaders all fake it. Why not boss everyone around? Maybe you'll end up king!"

Twitch rolled his eyes. "I don't want any of that. I just want . . . I don't know . . ."

"To nap in the mud?" Jace suggested.

"To live a normal life," Twitch said.

"Weak," Jace mocked. "Boring. Want to come with us to Creon to stop a torivor?"

Twitch cringed and looked to Cole.

"We are kind of here to recruit you," Cole said.

"Did he say a torivor?" Twitch asked. "Like Trillian?"

Cole quietly explained about Ramarro. Twitch listened solemnly.

"You're talking about the end of the world," Twitch said when Cole had finished.

"Pretty much," Cole said. "Unless we do something about it."

Twitch shook his head. "Why us? What are we supposed to do? Isn't there somebody else?"

"Nobody has a power like mine," Cole said. "When I use my ability on a Wayminder, we can go anywhere. We've defeated some tough stuff, Twitch. Dandalus encouraged me to try. The High King sponsored me for the mission as well. Gave me authority to speak in his name and everything."

"The High King helped you?" Twitch marveled.

"He's worried about the end of the world," Cole said.

Twitch rubbed his chin. "What could I do?"

"You're part of the team," Cole said. "You've saved us more than once. We never forgot you. We just didn't know how to find you."

Twitch closed his eyes. His eyelids fluttered. "We could disappoint the whole world."

"We could save the world," Cole said. "We can't count on anybody else to do it. And if we fail, it isn't any worse than doing nothing. We'd fail that way for sure."

Twitch blinked a lot and nodded. "You're right. Not much sense in doing nothing if we have a chance to keep the torivor locked up. Even a tiny chance."

"We'll be trying to find Wayminders who can help," Cole said. "Grand



Shapers. We have some clues on where to look.”

Twitch sighed. “I was really worried I would never see you guys again. And I was really worried I *would* see you guys again.”

“This is worse, right?” Jace said. “Don’t you wish we were dead?”

“No,” Twitch said. His eyes grew still. “But it’s scary.”

“Would you prefer a torivor showing up and destroying your people?” Cole asked. “Or enslaving them? Is that less scary?”

Twitch clenched his jaw and shook his head. “No. Scary or not, I’m willing to protect my village. My family. My people.”

“Then what are we sitting here for?” Jace asked.

“Squishy and warm,” Twitch said.

Jace nodded. “True.”

Twitch stood up. “But I know another pool where we can wash off.”

## CHAPTER

# 11

## JENNA

Cole had done his best to wring out his underwear but still felt a little damp beneath his pants when he returned to the parlor in the First Castle. Evening had fallen by the time Twitch finished his good-byes. The fancy room in Harmony's tower was dim and empty.

"I can't believe I'm inside the First Castle," Twitch said. He looked like a human again. Cole had almost forgotten that outside of Elloweer, Twitch lost his grinaldi features and became human unless he used his enchanted pendant. "You guys really know Queen Harmony?"

"She's Mira's mom," Jace said.

"I know," Twitch said. "That's different from actually meeting her."

"Cole is now an agent for the High King," Jace said. "Stick with us—you'll go places."

"Want to do one more trip tonight?" Cole asked Violet. "Just you and me?"

"Do you ever rest?" she asked.

"I don't know how much time we have," Cole said. "We're racing the end of the world."

"Why just the two of you?" Jace asked. "Looking for some romance?"

"No!" Cole said, glancing uncomfortably at Violet. "I thought you and Twitch would rather get settled."

"What are you up to?" Twitch asked.

"I want to find Dalton and Hunter," Cole said.

"Hunter?" Twitch asked.

Cole explained that he had found his older brother, who had been working as a feared Enforcer called the Hunter before changing sides.

"Do you know where to look?" Jace asked.

“They were going to try to check on Jenna,” Cole said. “I thought I could try the Temple of the Still Water.”

“Mystery solved,” Jace said. “You want time with Jenna!”

“Who’s Jenna?” Violet asked.

“The girl Cole likes,” Jace said.

“No,” Cole said, shuffling his feet. “I used to like her. I had a crush on her. It’s different now. I’m mostly just worried about her. She was taken from our home by slavers with other kids from my neighborhood.”

“She’s at some temple?” Twitch asked.

“I saw her at the Temple of the Still Water when I was an echo,” Cole said.

“Back to Necronum?” Violet asked. “We did a shrine. I’ve always wanted to see one of their temples.”

“You go romance Jenna,” Jace said. “We’ll find the queen.” He led Twitch out of the room.

“It’s not a romance,” Cole said.

“Can’t be much of one,” Violet said. “You don’t even have your first whiskers.”

“I had strong feelings for Jenna without really knowing her,” Cole said. “The crush was in my mind. She was pretty and we were friends. The friend part is the most important now.”

“Think the temple will still be standing?” Violet asked, taking Cole’s hand and receiving an energy boost.

“I hope so,” Cole said. “Owandell wants the princesses. I’m not sure he even knows about Jenna. And I’m not sure how much he cares about Dalton or Hunter.”

The waypoint opened, a glimmering oval in the dim light. “Ladies first?” Cole offered.

“I’d rather know you’re through so I’ll be sure I can get back,” Violet said. “No offense.”

Cole stepped through and emerged outside the temple. The fading sunset had already allowed the brightest stars to appear. The temple was not particularly tall but extremely broad, built with wavy shapes and rounded edges. Violet arrived beside him. The large gate was shut.

“Is that the front?” Cole asked.

“Looks closed,” Violet said.

“Let’s go see,” Cole replied, walking forward.

A guard emerged from a gatehouse as they approached. He wore a breastplate and rested one hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist. The guard tipped his hat. "Good evening, esteemed Wayminder. The temple gates closed at sundown."

"We're here on business from the High King," Cole said, producing the seal.

The guard took a close look, and his face reacted with shock. "That's the royal seal!"

"I'm his agent," Cole said.

The guard saluted. "Can I arrange a meeting for you, sir?"

"How about the prelate?" Cole asked.

"As you wish," the guard said. He thumped the gate. "Open in the name of the king!"

"It's past sundown," a voice replied from above.

"An agent of the High King seeks admittance," the guard called.

"Here?" the voice answered. "Now? Unannounced? Are you sure, Walter?"

"He showed up with a Wayminder," Walter said. "It's the royal seal, jewels and all."

The gate opened.

Walter had another guard take his place in the gatehouse and then escorted Cole and Violet to a waiting room inside the temple. He excused himself, promising to return shortly.

"That seal works wonders," Violet said.

"I was a little worried he might think it was fake," Cole said. "I'm just a kid."

"The guardsmen and legionnaires are well trained in matters of rank," Violet said. "And a Wayminder adds authenticity. We're known for our honesty. Though it undermines us a bit that I'm so young too."

Walter returned and led them to a simple, elegant room, where a slender man in a soft, dark robe awaited them. He greeted them sedately. "Welcome to the Temple of the Still Water. I am the prelate, Harward Aza. I understand you are servants of the High King?"

Cole showed the seal. "I'm his agent, yes—call me Cole—and this is my colleague Violet."

"Greetings, worthy Wayminder," the prelate said. "May I inquire what business brings you to our temple this fine evening?"

"The king has interest in a slave called Jenna," Cole said. "She arrived here from Junction several weeks ago."

“I know the girl,” Harward said. “A competent weaver.”

“I need an interview with her,” Cole said.

“Easily granted,” the prelate said. “May I ask what this concerns? Is she a threat?”

“No,” Cole said, recalling that some weavers were good at detecting falsehoods. He needed to keep his words true but vague. “She has important connections. If she is willing to work with me, the High King wants her freedom granted.”

The prelate’s demeanor grew a little colder. “She came at a price.”

“You will get twice what you paid,” Cole said.

Harward nodded. “A reasonable offer. I foresee no problem with this arrangement. May I ask . . . You seem young to hold so much responsibility. I am surprised I have not heard of your ascension to this office.”

“It happened recently,” Cole said. “I’m sure you’ll hear about me before long.” Cole felt tempted to offer his shaping powers as a reason for the instatement but decided people with real power didn’t tend to offer big explanations.

“Would you mind if I take a closer look at the seal?” Harward asked.

“No problem,” Cole said. He could tell the prelate was suspicious.

Harward leaned forward and shut one eye, fingering the medallion. He nodded, then backed up and gave a slight bow. “You will need accommodations for tonight?”

“No, thanks,” Cole said. “We’ll leave after we meet with Jenna.”

“As you will,” the prelate said. “Follow me.”

Cole could tell the prelate remained a little skeptical. It also seemed that Harward had been shown enough evidence not to ask more questions for now. Cole hoped the High King would get word around the five kingdoms about his appointment. The seal would hold more power if people actually believed him.

Harward excused himself after introducing Cole and Violet to an older woman named Gilda, who oversaw the enslaved female weavers. Gilda led Cole and Violet through a set of ornate doors to a spacious room with a floor of pale marble. Statues stood about the room. Several chairs and divans offered a variety of places to sit. Silver accented many of the furnishings.

“This late in the evening the silver sanctum is all yours,” Gilda said. “You can hold your interview here without being disturbed. While I fetch Jenna, please, make yourselves comfortable.” She indicated a bowl of grapes beside a carafe of water and left.

“I don’t think Harward trusts us,” Violet said, plucking a grape from the basket and popping it into her mouth.

“I’m young,” Cole said. “He’s never heard of me. It must look shady.”

“I’m still suspicious,” Violet said with a grin. “Can I see that seal again?”

“Very funny.”

“Shouldn’t be as big of a problem in Creon,” Violet said. “Wayminders get full respect there.”

“Even teenage ones?” Cole asked.

“Especially teenage ones,” Violet said. “It means I’m gifted.”

“People never gave you a hard time because of your age?” Cole asked.

Violet scrunched her brow. “I’m not sure.”

“You didn’t notice?” Cole asked.

“I can’t remember very well,” Violet said.

“How young were you?”

“I came to Junction a little more than a year ago.”

“That’s too long to remember?”

Violet slapped her forehead. “You’re from Outside and you’ve never been to Creon.”

“Right.”

“You don’t know about the mindscreen.”

“What’s that?”

“When you leave Creon, you forget a lot of what happened there,” Violet said. “Especially specifics.”

“Really?” Cole asked. “Do you remember your family?”

“You remember people,” Violet said. “You remember how you feel about them more than specific things you did or said. You remember vocabulary and how to swim, but you forget stories and accomplishments.”

“What about all your geography?” Cole asked.

“I had to relearn it,” Violet said. “I was good at geography in Creon, so I relearned quickly.”

“Still . . . that must be frustrating,” Cole said.

Violet shrugged. “It’s the price of being a Wayminder outside of Creon. A lot of what I know about Creon was learned at the school in Junction, not remembered.”

“Will you remember when you go back?” Cole asked.

“Yes, everything,” Violet said.

“Will I forget stuff?” Cole asked.

“You don’t forget coming in,” Violet said. “Only going out. We believe the founders of Creon designed it that way so you can’t send information back in time and have it leave Creon.”

“Because people can time travel in Creon,” Cole said.

“Yes. Not frequently, or easily, but yes. The time travel doesn’t stick when you leave Creon. If I took you to Creon right now, and you went back in time a hundred years, stayed a week, then left Creon, you would find yourself a week from now. You stay linked to the timestream in the rest of the Outskirts no matter how far back you go in Creon.”

“So why would they need to wipe your memory?” Cole asked.

“If you went back in time and gave information to somebody a hundred years ago in Creon, and if that person left Creon, it would still be a hundred years ago for him or her, because the person fully belongs to that time. But because of the mindscreens, anyone you told wouldn’t remember the message when they left Creon.”

“Write it down,” Cole said.

Violet smiled. “Smart. Except the writing in Creon doesn’t translate when it leaves Creon. However you normally write outside of Creon, inside Creon, it always comes out in Creonese. And outside of Creon, the same power that translates all languages in the Outskirts into a universal tongue leaves Creonese incomprehensible.”

“They planned well,” Cole said.

“Some Wayminders theorize that the mindscreens may not have been deliberate. They speculate the mindscreens and the barriers to written communication might have been an unavoidable consequence of placing a kingdom where time travel is possible beside kingdoms where time is inflexible.”

“Now my brain is hurting,” Cole said.

“It’s you!” came a voice from across the room.

Cole turned to find Jenna hurrying toward him. With her hood down, the wavy curls of her dark hair spilled across the shoulders of her silver robe. Gilda had not returned, but an old woman with a kindly face followed behind Jenna.

“Hi, Jenna,” Cole said, catching her in a tight hug.

“You’re not an echo this time,” she said, hugging back.

“Alive and in person,” Cole said, releasing the embrace. “This is Violet. She’s

a Wayminder.”

“Hello,” Jenna said with a little curtsy. “We don’t see many Wayminders here.”

“Have you seen any?” Violet asked.

“You’re the first,” Jenna admitted.

“Who is the lady?” Cole asked quietly.

“This is Granny Helki,” Jenna said. “She’s the echo I spend the most time with.”

“We’re like family,” Helki said in a sugary voice, smiling sweetly. “And how do you know my Jenna?”

Now that Cole looked closely, he could see that the old woman was faintly translucent. “We’re old friends,” he said.

Helki’s smile suddenly looked more forced. “How charming.”

“Did you find Dalton and Hunter?” Jenna asked.

“Not yet,” Cole said.

“They’re looking for you,” Jenna said.

“You saw them?” Cole exclaimed.

“I thought that might be why you came by,” Jenna said. “They were just here yesterday.”

“Really?” Cole said, then glanced at Helki. He stepped closer to Jenna. “Should we maybe talk in private?”

“No use in whispering,” Helki said. “I have superb hearing.”

“She knows they were here,” Jenna said. “I trust her.”

Cole felt uncertain. “I have some sensitive info for you. It could put Helki in danger.”

“Then it could put my Jenna in danger,” Helki said. “Darling, why not return to our project?”

“What project?” Cole asked.

“She’s teaching me to crochet,” Jenna said. “I’m working on a scarf.”

“Jenna has a golden touch,” Helki proclaimed.

“Do you know where Dalton and Hunter went?” Cole asked.

“They didn’t get specific,” Jenna said. “They thought it could endanger me. But I know they were looking for you.”

“Any idea what direction they went?” Violet asked.

“I really don’t know,” Jenna said. “They promised to come back for me when things are more settled.”



Cole rubbed his forehead. "That's frustrating. I was really hoping to find them."

"You can leave a message with me in case they come back," Jenna said.

"Unless you want to leave with us," Cole said.

"She is a slave of this temple, young man," Helki said. "Illegalities are unacceptable. A runaway slave faces execution."

"I don't mean as a runaway," Cole said. "I talked with the prelate. I'm an agent of the High King. I have permission to free you."

"Really?" Jenna said, hope and disbelief at war in her gaze.

"Sounds like a lot to swallow," Helki said. "Jenna, dear, are you sure you trust this ragamuffin?"

"Absolutely," Jenna said.

"It's true," Cole said. "You're free."

Jenna threw her arms around Cole. "Thank you! I can hardly believe it." She released him. "But how did you become an agent to the High King? I didn't think you were exactly on his side."

"We all have a bigger enemy now," Cole said. "Helki, have you heard of Nazeem?"

"Jenna, dear, you don't want to get involved with this scoundrel," Helki said. "I know the type. He's talking about foolishness you don't want in your life."

"Nazeem is incredibly powerful," Cole said. "He escaped the echolands. He's temporarily trapped, but if he gets free, the entire Outskirts is toast."

"Are you trying to stop him?" Jenna asked in wonder.

"Yeah," Cole said. "Your echo friend is right that you don't want to get mixed up in that."

"First reasonable thought of the night," Helki muttered.

"Do *you* have to be mixed up in it?" Jenna asked.

"It's me or nobody," Cole said. "I'm in deep. I have to see it through. The question is what you want to do. I could free you, and you could stay here. It's really easy to get to you now. I have a special way of traveling."

"We see the Wayminder," Helki said. "That can get you here quickly. But it's a one-way journey."

"Not really for me," Cole said. "I have other options."

"Is he talking sense?" Helki asked.

"Yes," Violet confirmed. "We have some unusual methods of traveling together."

“It means you could stay here, and we can come back for you no problem,” Cole said. “Or we could take you to the First Castle, and you can wait with Queen Harmony.”

“I have heard some whopping tales in my time,” Helki murmured.

“All true,” Violet verified. “Cole directly serves the High King. I’m with him by request of the queen.”

“What do you think I should do?” Jenna asked.

“It depends where you would be more comfortable,” Cole said. “We’ll be off trying to stop Nazeem. Do you like it here?”

“She loves it here,” Helki assured him. “Jenna is an extremely gifted summoner. She belongs in Necronum. She has a future here. It would be cruel to tear her from her home and her loved ones.”

“I really do have friends here,” Jenna said. “If I wasn’t a slave, it would be about as good as I could hope for. Plus, Dalton and Hunter may come back here looking for me. I want to help you find them if I can. I think I should stay.”

“Makes sense,” Cole said.

“You’ve got that right, buster,” Helki said with a sniff.

“Be nice,” Jenna told Helki. “He’s my friend.” She faced Cole. “She’s protective.”

“I noticed,” Cole said.

“Is Hunter really your brother?” Jenna asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “I didn’t remember him at first. He was taken before us, obviously, so we forgot him. He remembers me, though. He’s awesome in a fight. In the echolands a powerful lady helped me find some memories of him.”

“He seemed great,” Jenna said. “And it was so good to see Dalton. Good job rounding us up!”

“I’ve been trying,” Cole said.

Violet covered a yawn. “Sorry. Long day.”

“We should probably get going,” Cole said. “There’s so much to do.”

Jenna hugged him again. “Am I really free?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “I’m not sure how much good it will do you if you’re just staying here.”

“Lots of good,” Jenna said. “I can get paid. I can advance. I can come and go when I want.”

“I just have to finalize the details,” Cole said.

“You’re a miracle worker, Cole,” Jenna said. “Thank you so much. You’re

going to be out there fighting Nazeem?"

"Hopefully not fighting him," Cole said. "Hopefully just keeping him contained."

"You're incredible," Jenna said. "Be careful. Keep me updated."

"You bet," Cole said, feeling pleased and a little shy. He didn't feel as giddily attracted to Jenna as he once had, but he still cared about her and appreciated her praise. "We'll confirm everything with the prelate on our way out. I'll see you again soon, unless, you know . . ."

"He visits as an echo," Helki said.

Jenna shook her head. "You can do it. I'll see you soon."

Cole gave a tight smile. "You're the first person who thinks I have a chance."

"Perhaps because she doesn't understand what you're up against," Helki said. "Take care not to drag her further into it."

"I'm glad you're watching out for her," Cole said. "Stay alert, Helki. Scary times are coming. Watch out for Enforcers. Any controlled by Owandell are working for Nazeem."

"We'll be careful," Jenna promised.

"Tell Dalton and Hunter to wait here if they come back," Cole said. "We'll check in again before too long."

"I'll be waiting," Jenna said. "Nice to meet you, Violet."

"Same," Violet said.

"Bye," Cole said.

He and Violet walked away.

## CHAPTER

# 12

## THE IRON FORT

**I**'m coming with you," Mira announced as she entered the room where Cole sat eating his breakfast.

"Good morning," Cole said, taking another bite of his omelet.

"Sure, hi!" she said with an edge. "Tasty eggs? How's the weather? Aren't we in a hurry?"

"Who knows when I'll get another breakfast this good?" Cole replied.

"Whenever you want," Mira said. "With you around, Violet can open unlimited wayports. We can come back and eat here every morning."

"You're right," Cole said, wiping his lips with a fabric napkin. "I guess I don't have to completely stuff myself."

"Everyone else is ready," Mira said.

"I was hungry!" Cole said. "I slept in. I was up late."

"What about the big race against the end of the world?" Mira said. "Never mind. We'll wait. Want anything else? A soufflé?"

"I worked hard yesterday. I'll work hard today." Cole wiped his lips and chin. "I'm done. I'm glad you're coming with us. Is your mom really okay with it?"

"She tried to talk me out of it. I reminded her that we're top targets if Ramarro gets free. Trying to stop him beats hiding."

"Makes sense to me," Cole said.

"It did to her, too," Mira said. "She's just scared. And worn out from so much worry. I think this has been harder on her than on any of us. In the end I asked if I was supposed to be her prisoner to match Father holding Honor and Destiny."

Cole winced. "How'd she take that?"

"She cried," Mira said. "But I have permission to go."

Cole finished a glass of apple juice and stood. "Then let's go."

Mira led him back to the parlor where they had first entered the tower together. Jace, Violet, Twitch, and Harmony awaited them.

“Hi, guys,” Cole said. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Violet jerked her head toward the queen.

Cole gave a bow. “Hello, Your Highness.”

“Greetings, Cole. I trust you rested well?”

“And had a good breakfast,” Cole said. “How is Joe?”

“Stable,” Harmony said. “It will be a couple of weeks before he should walk on that leg. My physician will keep him in prolonged sleep for the next few days to accelerate the healing.”

“He might miss all the action,” Jace said.

“How do I get involved in that plan?” Twitch asked. Everyone laughed, and he smiled uncertainly.

“Can you keep an eye out for my friend Dalton and my brother, Hunter?” Cole asked Harmony. “They’ll be looking for me. I missed them by a day when I visited Jenna last night in Necronum.”

“How was Jenna?” Jace wondered.

“Very pretty,” Violet said. “She appreciates Cole. Not much chemistry, though.”

“Ouch,” Cole said.

“She likes him,” Violet said. “They’re friends.”

“I will watch for Dalton and Hunter and put out the word to my contacts,” Harmony said. “Can I trust you to protect my Miracle? And to be careful with my Elegance?”

“I’ll do my best,” Cole promised.

“We all will,” Jace assured her.

“Then you had better be off,” Harmony said. “Come back often.”

“We will,” Mira promised.

“Violet, do you know how to approach the Iron Fort?” Harmony asked.

“I understand the basics, Your Highness,” Violet said, “but I’ve never done it.”

“What makes it tricky to approach?” Twitch asked.

“The walls of iron are not the main protection,” Violet said. “The space around the Iron Fort has been shaped so that a Wayminder can’t open a waypoint into the fort or anywhere near it. If you try to walk or ride there, you will find the distance to it ever increasing.”

“So how do we get there?” Jace asked.

“Access must be granted,” Violet said. “I know where to go. I’m not sure how it works.”

“Nor am I,” Harmony said. She held up a sealed message. “This letter asks for admittance in my name. It should suffice. If not, Cole can use his status as an agent of the High King. Don’t begin with that, since Elegance would resist anyone coming in the name of her father.”

“We should go,” Mira said.

“Give Elegance my love,” Harmony said. “Return as soon as you can.”

“We won’t remember much of what happened in Creon when we check back in,” Violet said.

“That’s right,” Harmony said. “The mindscreens. But at least I will know you are well.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Mira said, giving Harmony a hug. “I’ll see you soon.”

Violet opened a wayport near Cole.

“Off we go,” Cole said.

One step later, he stood on a sandy expanse. Low dunes overlapped into the distance in all directions. Heat poured down from the morning sun and reflected up from the sand. Before him stood an ancient statue of a hooded snake, rising out of the sand as if prepared to strike, four times his height, most of the details worn smooth. Not far from the statue bloomed a large orange-and-yellow-striped tent, a blue pennant hanging limp at the top.

Jace came through the wayport, followed by Mira, Twitch, and finally Violet. Scanning all around, Cole saw no other signs of life—no buildings, no roads, no vegetation, no animals, no fences, no footprints. Certainly no iron fortress.

“Whoa,” Violet said, raising one hand to her temple. “I just got a big chunk of my life back.”

“Your memories?” Cole asked.

“It’s like waking up,” Violet said. “I wasn’t ready for it to be so sudden. So much so quickly.”

“Big snake,” Jace said.

“A monument to the Perennial Serpent,” Violet said. “Hundreds of years ago, it plagued Creon, unpredictably appearing and slaying whoever it encountered, usually Wayminders. It gets the blame for killing two Grand Shapers.”

“Gets the blame?” Twitch asked.

“Witnesses don’t tend to survive the Perennial Serpent,” Violet said. “A lot of what we know is speculation. Educated guesses.”

“Is it still around?” Mira asked.

Violet fished a couple of copper ringers from her robe and tossed them onto the sand near the statue. “Not for a couple hundred years.”

“If you have too many ringers, I’ll take them,” Jace offered.

Violet smiled. “The monuments are used as warnings to intruders. And as superstitious petitions for the serpent to pass by a location.” She tossed one more copper ringer onto the sand. “We can use all the luck we can get.”

Jace shrugged. “You think it’s lucky to throw away money? We were raised very differently.”

“What about the tent?” Cole asked.

“That’s where we’re going,” Violet said.

“Kind of flimsy iron,” Jace said.

Violet rolled her eyes. “It’s not the fort. Hopefully whoever is inside can grant access.”

Cole followed Violet over to the tent, feet sinking halfway into the sand with each step. They huddled together near the flap covering the entrance.

“Hello?” Violet called. “We seek the Iron Fort.”

“Enter,” a voice replied.

Violet lifted the flap, and Cole stepped into the tent, the others right behind him. The coolness inside washed over him in stark contrast to the desert heat. Could it be air-conditioned? He didn’t see any machinery.

A man and a woman stood toward the center of the generous space. They wore robes like Wayminders, but iron bands circled their foreheads, and veils hid their faces. Embroidered rugs covered the ground, with large pillows and cushions serving as furniture. Most incongruently, a stone fountain babbled near one silky wall.

“Have you an appointment?” the man inquired.

“No,” Violet said.

“Visits to the retreat are handled only by appointment,” the man replied swiftly.

“This is an emergency,” Violet said.

The woman held up her hands. “What one might label an emergency, another might term a lack of preparation.”

“Security is the top priority of the retreat,” the man said. “Our protocols must be followed for the benefit of our clients.”

“My sister lives there,” Mira said.

“Many of our clients have relatives,” the man said. “They all must adhere to our policies.”

“I have a letter from the queen,” Violet said, producing her document.

“Queen Harmony?” the man asked. He paused. “Let me see.”

Violet approached with the letter. The man took it and looked it over. The woman slid aside her veil and leaned in close. A thin chain curved from one nostril to her earlobe.

The woman whispered to the man. He whispered back, then faced Violet. “My associate will take your document inside. Please back away toward the door.”

Violet returned to stand by Cole.

“No hasty movements,” the man said. “We’re both ready to die and ready to kill you.”

A wayport opened up, shining more brightly than any of the wayports Violet had opened. The woman stepped through, carrying the letter. The wayport closed behind her.

“Mind if I get a drink?” Jace asked. “The sound is making me so thirsty.”

“Help yourself,” the man said. “Use the ladle.”

Jace went to the fountain and ladled water into an ornate bowl. He took a sip. Violet and Twitch joined him.

“Where does the water come from?” Mira asked.

“We keep a tiny wayport open to a distant lake,” the man said.

“Is that how you keep the air cool?” Cole wondered.

“Two other small wayports to a pair of chilly locations,” the man said.

“You have a conduit to the Iron Fort?” Violet wondered as she sipped water.

“As you might imagine,” the man said.

“A conduit is like a permanent wayport,” Violet explained. “Think of it like an established tunnel versus a temporary passage. The conduit must be the only practical way through the defenses.”

“We can collapse it at any time,” the man said.

The bright wayport reappeared, and the woman emerged. The wayport remained open.

“The Host wishes to meet them,” the woman reported.

“You’re not serious,” the man said.

“That was an authentic request from Queen Harmony,” the woman said. “Urgent undertones. The Host wants to know more.”



“All of them?” the man replied.

“The Host is intrigued,” the woman said.

The man shrugged. “Not my call.” He waved at the wayport. “Go with Renni.”

Violet entered first, then Mira, and then Cole. He emerged inside a spacious cage standing on light gray sand. After the cool of the tent, the heat was instantly uncomfortable. Beyond the bars of the cage loomed a gigantic wall of solid iron. Endless sharp-edged dunes extended in all other directions.

Jace came through the wayport, followed by Twitch and finally the woman. The wayport closed.

“Renni—reporting with the visitors!” the woman called out.

A new bright wayport opened up.

“One at a time,” Renni said.

Violet stepped through.

Twitch sidled up next to Cole, his eyes on the bars of the cage. “If they didn’t like who came through, you’d be in trouble.”

Cole nodded. “You’d be an easy target with nowhere to run.”

“Proceed,” Renni said.

The others had gone through already. Cole passed through the wayport after Twitch and found himself in a windowless iron room lit by torches. Two armored guards faced him. Renni came through, and the wayport closed.

“Leave all weapons here,” one guard said. “They will be returned when you exit.”

Cole unbuckled his Jumping Sword. Mira gave up her Jumping Sword as well. Twitch turned in his short sword. Violet handed over a small knife, more a tool than a weapon. Jace made no move to surrender his rope.

The guards gave them all a pat down. Cole avoided staring at Jace in fear of making the guards suspicious. His golden rope was currently a small golden strand. It shouldn’t even be able to work here. If the guards didn’t know about Cole’s power, there would be no reason to worry about the rope, even if they could tell it had been expertly shaped.

They all passed inspection, and another bright wayport opened. One by one they went through. Cole hung back until his friends had gone, then stepped through into a fancy office, where a gaunt man with a widow’s peak sat behind an iron desk, large hands with long fingers laced in front of him on top of the document from the queen. Renni followed and closed the wayport.

“Queen Harmony endorses your visit,” the gaunt man said briskly. “I am the Host at this retreat. My primary job is protecting our clients. Explain who you wish to see.”

“My sister Elegance,” Mira said.

“Ah,” the Host said, leaning back in his chair. “You are one of the sisters.”

“Miracle Pemberton,” she said.

“You could have all taken refuge here,” the Host said. “It would have been sensible.”

“The idea was to spread us out,” Mira said. “One in each kingdom. I need to see Elegance.”

“So I have gathered,” the Host said. He attempted a smile. It did not appear natural. “I have never been approached by a group composed entirely of children. Even the Wayminder is young. Was this supposed to appeal to my sentiment?”

“We’re on a mission,” Cole said.

The Host leaned forward, hands still clasped. “Such unlikely agents. Can it be as urgent as the queen insinuates?”

“It’s vital,” Mira said.

“You five were entrusted with a matter of supreme importance?” the Host asked. “Is there more to you than greets the eye? What would you do if I attempted to hold you here?”

“Seriously?” Jace asked.

“Seriously,” the Host said, his smile looking more natural and a lot less friendly.

Jace held out his strand. Cole touched it and pushed power into it. The golden rope shot out and snaked around the Host’s neck, jerking him to his feet. Cole grabbed Violet, and she opened a wayport. Renni produced a knife, and the other end of the golden rope bound her hands and thrust her back against the wall.

Still smiling, the Host gave a chuckle. “Better than expected. I asked for this. Message received. Please release me.”

The rope went slack and retracted. The Host rubbed his neck.

“I’m so sorry,” Renni said.

“No apology required,” the Host replied. “Would you release her as well? Stand down, Renni.”

The rope unwound from her arms and shrank into a small golden strand.

“You opened a wayport so quickly?” the Host asked. “Where could it have led?”

“A lower level here in the fort,” Violet said. “I couldn’t feel a way out.”

“Thankfully,” the Host said. “Or else we would have needed to reconstruct our entire defensive scheme. You reached our arrival station by wayport only minutes ago.”

“Yes,” Violet said.

“What an unbelievably quick recovery from your previous efforts,” the Host said.

Renni sank to her knees, head bowed. “I am ashamed. I do not know how—”

The Host held up a hand and interrupted. “No apology required. I still don’t understand how they did it. You, boy, your name?”

“Cole.”

“Cole, I am perplexed. Your power appears whole and untainted. Are you a shapemaker? To my knowledge, only they can so flagrantly flout the natural order of shaping.”

“No, but my power is unusual.”

The Host gave a sharklike smile. “That puts it lightly. I don’t suppose you are for hire.”

“We really are on an urgent mission,” Cole said.

“I believe you,” the Host said. “I have a keen interest in world events. Intelligence supports effective security. Your secrets are safe here. Discretion is my specialty. Tell me the urgent matter, and I will grant the access you seek.”

Cole found all of his friends looking at him. He saw no big reason to keep Ramarro a secret. The more who prepared to meet him the better. “A torivor is about to break free in Creon.”

“There is no torivor in Creon,” the Host said.

Cole held up a finger. “There *was* no torivor in Creon. A torivor named Ramarro recently escaped the echolands and was imprisoned here. The prison will not hold him long. In the echolands he went by Nazeem.”

“Fascinating,” the Host said slowly. “I have heard of this Nazeem. I gather information from all quarters. The name has been repeated in the echolands of late. It never occurred to me the name could belong to Ramarro. These are dire tidings.”

“You mentioned shapemaking,” Cole said. “The shapemakers are our enemies. Ramarro taught them, starting with Owandell.”

“All these pieces fit,” the Host said. “This is the best intelligence I have heard in years. It demands my immediate attention. I not only grant you the access you seek, but I wish you well in your mission, and offer permission to return here if you have information to share or desire employment.” He glanced at Renni. “That is all.”

A new wayport appeared. Violet let hers close.

## CHAPTER

# 13

## ELEGANCE

In a quiet courtyard within the fort, flagstone paths meandered between lawns, flower beds, and shrubs. Led by Renni, Cole and his friends found Elegance near a still pond shaded by numerous trees with sprawling limbs.

Cole had previously seen Elegance in a simulated reality created by the torivor Trillian, but he was struck by her beauty as never before. Maybe it was her current hairstyle, or her flattering dress, or a knowing quality in her soulful eyes, but the sight of her made him secretly thrilled, and a little shy. Elegance had stopped aging around her eighteenth birthday, and she appeared fully grown. Tall and graceful, of all the princesses, she bore the clearest resemblance to Harmony.

Beside her sat an old man in a wheelchair made mostly of dark, polished wood. A blanket lay folded across his lap. What wispy white hair remained was neatly combed. Liver spots showed through on his partially bald scalp.

Elegance glided forward to greet her sister. “Miracle, I’m so relieved to find you well.”

Cole didn’t think her tone or manner seemed relieved. At best she seemed polite.

“Hi, Ella,” Mira said.

“Elegance, dear, among company,” Elegance said.

Mira rolled her eyes. “These are my friends, not company. And we’re in a hideout, not our castle.”

Elegance raised a chiding finger. “I know these are friends. Otherwise, I wouldn’t publicly correct you.”

“When have you ever resisted a chance to correct anyone?” Mira asked.

The old man in the wheelchair chuckled. Elegance shot him a glance. “Living among the barbarians need not mean living like the barbarians. Social graces

matter. We can languish in exile and still live like royalty.”

“Until you’re being chased by Enforcers,” Mira said.

“I’ve run from my share of Enforcers,” Elegance assured her. “And I still behave as my station demands.”

“That you have,” said the old man in the wheelchair, gazing at her lovingly. “And that you do.”

“This is Brogan Holt,” Elegance said. “My protector ever since I went into hiding.”

“I remember Brogan,” Mira said. “I can’t believe Mother paired him with you.”

“I recall you, too, Mira,” Brogan said, his voice a bit frail. “You haven’t changed at all. Just like your sister. I’ve looked better.”

“He’s also my husband,” Elegance said, a touch of defiance in her tone.

“Really?” Mira asked. “Mother is going to faint.”

“Mother knows,” Elegance asked. “Do you think I’d make a move like that unsanctioned?”

“We were wed twelve years after going into hiding,” Brogan said.

“You were thirty,” Elegance replied. “Aging while I didn’t. We started out the same age. I turned eighteen the week we went into exile.”

“Wait,” Jace said. “You were put in charge of her when you were eighteen?”

The old man smiled. “We had no idea how young we were.”

Cole couldn’t help thinking the relationship was fairly strange—Elegance seemed much too youthful to have such an elderly husband. But Cole supposed it made sense since they’d started out the same age, and because, unlike her younger sisters, Elegance was mostly grown-up when she stopped aging. Even with excuses in mind, witnessing the extreme age gap between the couple was still a little unsettling.

“The name Brogan Holt would be known across the five kingdoms had he not become my protector,” Elegance said. “He is without question the finest swordsman of his generation. He won the Harvest Tournament at sixteen and seventeen, the youngest to ever win it by five years.”

“And by eighteen he was in exile,” Cole said.

“Only one other knight ever won in back-to-back years,” Elegance said, looking at the old man warmly. “Only two other knights won three times in their lifetimes. None won four. Brogan might have won it ten times. He only got better.”

“Isn’t sixteen young to enter the Harvest Tournament?” Twitch asked.

Brogan gave a chuckle.

“Unusually young, yes,” Elegance said. “Each noble family in the kingdoms has an annual right to one entrant. Each puts forth their best champion—a seasoned knight from the household or an expert member of the family. Brogan’s father was a lesser lord of the sort whose champions tend to get knocked out in the early rounds. Brogan showed great promise, and, without more impressive options, he got the nomination and won the most stunning string of upsets in memory. Contender after contender fell to him. Then the next year, with every competitor preparing specifically for him, he won again. He made it look easier the second time.”

“It was easier,” Brogan said from his chair. “I had grown some.”

“My father added him to his personal guard,” Elegance said. “But he became close with Mother.”

“He became close with *you*,” Mira said. “I still can’t believe Mother sent you away with him.”

Elegance glanced shyly at Brogan. “It was a desperate hour. Mother needed someone she could fully trust to protect me. I lobbied for Brogan and she agreed. And that choice almost certainly saved my life. I can’t count how many times he rescued us with his sword.”

“We had an adventure or two,” Brogan said with a smile.

“You were young back then,” Jace said. “But you don’t look as old as you should be.”

“It’s why we came here,” Elegance said. “We lived on the run for years, affiliating with the Unseen. As sixty approached, Brogan was still the best fighter in the five kingdoms, but we were starting to realize he wasn’t immortal.”

“I never asked you to come here with me,” Brogan said. “I wanted you to find a new protector and leave me behind.”

Elegance crossed to Brogan and touched his shoulder. “I want all the time with you I can get. Being here has already prolonged your life at least twenty years. I’m hoping for thirty more.”

Brogan gave a gentle huff. “Optimistic.”

“We’re dominating the conversation,” Elegance said. “How have you been, Miracle? You look well.”

“I have my power back,” Mira said.

“In full?” Elegance asked.

“In full. All the sisters do. Except you.”

“How?” Elegance asked, looking surprised.

“Have you felt your shaping returning?” Mira asked. “We’ve all experienced it to varying degrees.”

“No,” Elegance said. “Nothing. No difference.”

“Are you sure?” Mira asked.

Elegance gave Mira a knowing glare. “Believe me, I would notice.”

Mira recited how Owandell had conspired to take the shaping powers he had given their father and reshape them for his own purposes. She explained how his efforts had gone wrong in different ways with Carnag, the Rogue Knight, Roxie, and the Mare. She told how their father’s health diminished as he lost his connection to their powers.

“Whatever hardships befall that man are too little and too late,” Elegance said. “I can’t express how long I’ve yearned to hear of his demise.”

“It could be soon, based on how he looked when I last saw him,” Cole said.

“You met our father?” Elegance asked him.

“We spoke not long ago,” Cole said, not wanting to go into detail about becoming Stafford’s emissary.

“Has there been any strange trouble in Creon over the last year?” Mira asked. “Some way your power could have been manifesting?”

“Not that comes to mind,” Elegance said, glancing at Brogan, who gave a vague shrug. “We get briefed by the Host. There are all the usual tensions between the nobles and the Wayminders, but no instances of rampaging shaping power.”

“Nothing,” Brogan agreed. “You could ask the Host directly.”

“I still haven’t shared the worst news,” Mira said. “Have you heard of the torivors?”

“I know the stories,” Elegance said.

Mira explained about Owandell and the torivors in detail. She emphasized that Ramarro was imprisoned somewhere in Creon and that stopping him was the only way to save the world.

Elegance smirked. “And Mother sent . . . children?”

“Mother could have sent anyone,” Mira said. “And she chose to send us. These children defeated Carnag in Sambria. We saved Elloweer from Morgassa. We protected Zeropolis from Roxie. And we stood up to Ramarro in



Necronum. When the torivor was making his escape into the physical world, Cole forced him into a new prison. You're not new to the five kingdoms. You know examples of young people with great shaping power."

"Don't be so touchy, Miracle," Elegance said. "It's just peculiar."

"We're it, Ella," Mira said. "We're the last line of defense."

"Elegance."

Mira sighed. "And we need your help."

"What am I supposed to do?" Elegance asked.

"Help us find your shaping power," Mira said. "Owandell wants to help Ramarro. He already abandoned Junction. Sooner or later Owandell will come to Creon. He and his shapecrafters might try to use your shaping power against us."

"Miracle, I don't have any powers," Elegance said. "And I'm not a specialist in combat. You want Honor for that. I need to look after Brogan."

"I'm in the safest stronghold in the five kingdoms," Brogan said. "With servants watching over me. Don't let me hold you back. Ever."

Elegance knelt beside her husband. "You know I'm not a fighter."

Brogan looked at Mira. "Elegance is brave and good and has faced unspeakable danger. And she is little use in a physical confrontation."

"None of us are expert fighters," Mira said.

"Speak for yourself," Jace said.

"We're doing what needs to be done," Mira continued, ignoring him.

"Maybe we could wheel Brogan at them," Jace said. "Can you still hold a jousting lance?"

Brogan grinned. "I'd welcome the chance to try."

"This is becoming absurd," Elegance said shortly. "I am sympathetic to your mission. It sounds heroic and necessary. But I hear no evidence of how my involvement can benefit anyone."

"What if your power is causing harm?" Mira asked. "What if only you can help us stop it?"

"Where is the evidence of my power harming anyone?" Elegance asked. "I hear no hint of my power currently being involved. I am a princess of the Outskirts and heir to the throne. If we discover my power is wreaking havoc, I will do my duty. But right now all you have is speculation."

"What about other kinds of help?" Mira asked. "Connections?"

"I had contacts among the Unseen here," Elegance said. "Those relationships

have faded over the years. We've lived in relative isolation for decades. My best connection now is the Host. Perhaps he can offer guidance. He takes a real interest in the welfare of Creon and has serious access to Creon's elite."

Mira looked at Cole.

"Worth a try," Cole said. "We need to find Grand Shapers. People who can help us figure out how the vault holding Ramarro works and how we can make it stronger. People who can help us figure out how to face Ramarro if he gets free."

"I wish I could help," Brogan said. "It's not fair that a man learns and grows and reaches his prime only to enter a slow decline that eventually leaves him helpless as a baby."

"You gave years of valiant service, my love," Elegance said. "You saved my life innumerable times, through your wisdom and your skill. Now is your time to rest. This hour comes to all who live long enough."

"We can handle it," Jace said stoutly.

"Thanks for wanting to help," Cole said.

"Perhaps I should send you on your way," Elegance said. "Your errand sounds urgent, and more talk will only cause frustration."

"Surely they can stay for a meal," Brogan said.

"We are in kind of a hurry," Cole said.

"What about the Host?" Mira asked.

"Remind me your name?" Elegance asked Renni.

"Renni, Your Highness," she replied with a slight curtsy.

"Can you return them to the Host?" Elegance asked.

"It should not be a problem," Renni said.

"Very well," Elegance said. "Miracle, I'm relieved you are well. Thank you for news about Mother and our siblings." Her gaze swept the others in the group. "Thank you for your roles in aiding my family and protecting the kingdom. I'm grateful for your service and your sacrifices."

"Come with me," Renni said.

\* \* \*

Less than half an hour later, Cole sat at a table with Jace, Twitch, Violet, Mira, and the Host. Renni stood nearby. Once the food was laid out, the servants departed. Between the delicious meal before him and the shady courtyard where

they dined, Cole was almost able to forget they were in an iron fortress in the middle of a vast desert. And that the world could end at any moment.

“I trust your sister is pleased with her stay,” the Host said to Mira politely as he gently removed a roasted chunk of squash from a skewer.

“She seems really content,” Mira said. “Thanks for guarding her and Brogan so well. She wasn’t as helpful as we’d hoped.”

“Oh?” the Host asked before inserting the squash into his mouth.

“We need information,” Mira said. “Connections. Leads to follow. Ramarro must be stopped. There is so much we don’t know.”

“The steak,” Jace murmured to Cole.

“Huh?” Cole asked.

Jace pointed at a skewer of seasoned beef with his fork. “Try some. So garlicky. Heaven.”

“It really is excellent steak,” the Host said. “I need to limit my intake, but please, indulge.”

Cole jabbed his fork into a juicy hunk of meat and slid it off the skewer. It was almost too hot, and surprisingly tender. Jace was right—it was divine.

“What information do you most require?” the Host asked.

Mira nodded at Cole.

“In other kingdoms we’ve had help from Grand Shapers,” Cole said. “In most cases we wouldn’t have survived long without it.”

“You would like an audience with the Grand Shaper of Creon?” the Host asked.

“As many as we can find,” Cole replied.

The Host narrowed his gaze. “Are you seeking confirmation of the rumor that there is more than one living Grand Shaper in Creon?”

“We know that much,” Cole said. “We just want to find as many as possible. We have to keep the vault closed. If we can’t, we need a plan to recapture Ramarro. Or maybe even to fight him.”

“Very few know that some of the former Grand Shapers of Creon secretly dwell among us,” the Host said. “Very few indeed. None know where to find them. Including our present Grand Shaper.”

“We have a clue about where to find one,” Cole said.

The Host’s eyes flashed with interest. “I don’t suppose you would be willing to share?”

“Depends what he says after we make contact,” Cole said.

“Who is he?” the Host asked.

“We need to keep a few secrets for now,” Cole said. “Lots of people want to stop us. We can’t risk info getting out about where we are going.”

“I am a secure confidant,” the Host assured him. “But I admire the caution. What else?”

“Do you have any idea where the ancient vault might be that is holding Ramarro?” Cole asked.

The Host folded his arms and bowed his head in thought. “I do not. If it wasn’t made known to the ruling class, a project so secretive and important would have been cleverly hidden long ago. I can have my people research the topic.”

“Would you?” Mira asked.

“Life as we know it in the Outskirts is under attack,” the Host said. “I’ll do all in my power to aid you. If you need help from any of the noble families of Creon, I can open doors. Finding Grand Shapers gets hazy. I don’t have the information, and I have no idea who does.”

“We appreciate what help you have given,” Mira said. “We should get going.”

“After we eat some more,” Jace said around a mouthful of steak.

“I understand,” the Host said. He stood. “Other matters require my attention. Renni will show you out when you’re ready.” He held out a rolled length of parchment to Mira. “This document contains written permission to access the retreat from the outer tent. Few have such general permission, including residents here. Feel free to visit me as needed. I will continue to investigate the matters we have discussed.”

Mira accepted the document, and the Host gave a stiff bow before exiting.

“I can’t believe we just received permanent access to the Iron Fort,” Violet said reverently.

“Neither can I,” Renni added with a sniff.

\* \* \*

After the meal, Renni led them through a wayport back to the lonely tent in the desert. The air inside the tent remained refreshing. Two men Cole had not seen yet stood guard.

Upon exiting the tent, the heat struck violently, radiating up from the sand and down from the sky. The bright sun was still an hour or two from sinking

into the dunes.

“We’re going to cook if we stay here long,” Cole said.

“Where to next?” Twitch asked.

“Are you speaking again?” Jace asked. “I almost forgot you were here.”

Twitch blinked repeatedly and shrugged. “Maybe I don’t want attention from powerful people.”

“Might not be bad thinking,” Cole muttered.

“First we should check in with Mother,” Mira said. “Then . . . I guess we go looking for Lorenzo Debray.”

“All right,” Violet said. “Back to Harmony’s tower in the First Castle.” She held out her hand, and Cole took it, then pushed power into her.

A wayport opened.

Mira stepped through first. Violet came last.

The old female servant who had greeted Cole several times stood staring at them with wide, worried eyes.

“Greta,” Mira said. “What’s wrong?”

The woman looked around as if nervous. “You don’t know?” she whispered. “They’ve all gone missing!”

“Who?” Mira asked.

Greta winced. “Keep your voice down, Your Highness. The soldiers are still investigating.”

“Who is missing?” Mira whispered urgently.

“Your mother, your father, your sisters,” Greta said. “All of them. You and your little band are all suspects.”

CHAPTER  
— 14 —  
**IMPLICATED**

**W**hy are we suspects?” Mira asked ardently, her voice rising above a whisper.

“Keep it down, Your Highness,” Greta warned, looking around again. “They simply vanished. All of them. While under heavy guard. And you’ve been popping in and out lately with a Wayminder.”

“Maybe they snuck off,” Mira said.

“All of them?” Greta asked incredulously. “The king and queen together? Not to mention that word has it your father is in no condition to travel.”

“He isn’t,” Cole confirmed.

Mira looked stunned. “They’re all . . . gone?”

“Disappeared right under our noses,” Greta said. “I was here when it happened. Never heard a peep. Her Majesty seemed to disappear, just like the others. The captain of the guard has kept it quiet while he investigates.”

“It wasn’t me,” Violet said. “But it must have been Wayminders.”

“You told me Wayminders wouldn’t enter a private place,” Cole said.

“And Enforcers don’t burn down shrines,” Violet replied. “Owandell expects the world to end. He’s breaking all the rules.”

“Could be,” Mira said.

“Owandell?” Greta asked.

A door to the parlor opened, and a soldier froze, staring at them.

“Time to go,” Greta whispered urgently.

Jace held out his rope to Cole, who touched it and flooded it with energy. The rope lashed out and thrust the soldier back as he began to raise the alarm.

Cole grabbed Violet, and she opened a wayport. Twitch ducked through. Jace slammed the parlor door with the rope. Then he used the rope to slide a fancy sofa in front of it.

“To the parlor!” the soldier was calling from beyond the door. “They’re here! Greta was in on it!”

“Come, Greta,” Mira said, guiding the old woman into the wayport.

The door burst open, toppling the sofa. Multiple soldiers lunged forward and were slammed back as Jace hurled an armchair into the doorway.

Maintaining his connection to the rope and Violet, Cole hurried through the portal. Jace followed. Then Violet. Soldiers were shouting.

The wayport closed.

Cole and his friends stood on the slope outside of Skyport. A light breeze ruffled the brush. Castles drifted in the distance.

“You’re quick with that rope,” Violet said.

“I liked bashing them with the chair,” Jace said. “I need to remember to pick up stuff and use it like a club more.”

“Skyport?” Cole asked.

“First place that came to mind,” Violet said.

“I really don’t miss this place,” Mira said, gazing out at the castles.

“That was close,” Twitch said. “What now?”

Mira approached Greta. “Are you all right?”

The woman looked shaken. “Well enough, I suppose, for suddenly being a fugitive after decades of loyal service.”

“Try being her daughter,” Mira said bitterly.

“You children really weren’t involved in the disappearances?” Greta asked.

“Not at all,” Mira said. “It had to be Owandell.”

Greta nodded. “Stafford made his move against him. Owandell would waste little time retaliating if he could.”

“No king,” Mira said. “No queen. No heirs.”

“Who will run the kingdom?” Violet asked.

“Owandell would have had the best chance before the High King discredited him,” Greta said. “I suppose the nobles will fight it out once the news goes abroad.”

Mira picked up a rock and flung it down the slope. “I shouldn’t have left them! We had Violet! We could have stolen Nori and Tessa. We could have brought Mother to safety. I didn’t take them, Greta. But I should have!”

“We couldn’t see this coming,” Cole said.

Mira made fists and closed her eyes. “Seems pretty clear now! We had them, Cole! They were safe. We had them. Now they’re who knows where? And

Owandell is playing this like he has nothing to lose.”

“We’ll save them,” Jace said.

“We better,” Mira said.

“We will,” Jace assured her. “They’re too valuable for Owandell to harm them.”

“I hope you’re right,” Mira said. “We don’t really know what Owandell is capable of with his master returning.” She turned to Greta. “Where would you like to go?”

“Me?” Greta asked.

“We can take you anywhere,” Mira said. “Where would you be most safe and comfortable?”

“My sister has a farm outside of Junction City near the border of Elloweer,” Greta said.

“Nearest town?” Violet asked.

“Just a little hamlet. Willet.”

“I know it,” Violet said. “South of Myer’s Mill. Does the farm have any distinguishing features?”

“Big farm,” Greta said. “Just east of Willet. Two barns. An orchard with concentric rings of trees. That’s not usual, at least in those parts.”

Violet closed her eyes.

Still connected to her power, Cole fed her some extra energy.

“I think I have it,” Violet said, opening her eyes. “Should she go now?”

“The less she hears the better,” Twitch said. “For her and for us.”

A shimmering wayport appeared.

Wringing her hands, Greta turned to Mira. “You’ll come get me if you find your mother?”

“Of course,” Mira said. “And I’ll come make sure Violet has the right farm.”

Greta stepped through the wayport. Mira followed.

“I wonder what kind of fruit the orchard has?” Jace mused.

“Didn’t we just eat?” Cole asked. “I feel full.”

“Not fruit,” Jace said. “Apples sound good.”

Twitch approached the wayport. “I can’t see through it. Or hear them.”

“That’s right,” Violet said. “Many wayports are soundproof.”

“But I can feel connections through them,” Cole said. “If I have them established. Even if I can’t see or hear the other side.”

“I can’t explain that,” Violet said. “Must work differently than sight and



sound.”

Mira came back through, and the wayport vanished.

“Good job,” Mira said. “It was her sister’s place.”

Violet gave a pleased smile.

“Remember when the four of us escaped this nightmare in a flying lifeboat?”

Twitch asked, gazing down at Skyport.

“Probably the best day of my life,” Jace said.

“It was a scary day,” Cole observed. “We almost died.”

“‘Almost’ can be a very important word,” Jace said.

“Do any of you remember if we saw Elegance?” Mira asked.

Cole turned to her. What did he remember? “I think so. There was an old guy in a wheelchair.”

“Yes,” Twitch said. “And I remember Elegance.”

“Me too,” Jace said. “But I don’t remember what we decided.”

“The mindscreen,” Cole muttered.

“I couldn’t tell if I was remembering her or imagining it,” Mira said. “Now that you mention it, I remember the old guy too. He had been her protector I think.”

“Now he is her husband,” Violet said. “I recall that much.”

“The old guy?” Cole asked.

“They must have gotten married when they were younger,” Mira said. “I wonder if Mother knows.”

“Wasn’t there another guy?” Twitch asked. “Who ran the Iron Fort?”

“He liked us,” Cole said. “I don’t remember much else.”

“I have this,” Mira said, holding up a rolled parchment.

“Won’t do you any good,” Violet said as Mira unrolled it.

“She’s right,” Mira said. “Gibberish.”

“Think it might be a clue?” Cole asked. “Info about Ramarro or the Grand Shapers?”

“We’ll be able to read it in Creon,” Violet said. “And we’ll remember what we forgot.”

“I don’t even know if Elegance is joining us,” Mira said.

“Wouldn’t she already be with us?” Twitch asked.

“Probably true,” Cole said.

“Imagine your whole life being like this,” Violet said. “Remembering people, especially those closest to you, but without so many specifics.”

“I wouldn’t mind forgetting a lot of my life,” Jace said.

“It might feel that way sometimes,” Violet said. “I promise you it isn’t very fun.”

“Should we go to Creon so we can remember?” Twitch asked.

“There is one stop I want to make first,” Cole said. “While I still speak for the king. Before news spreads that he’s gone.”

“Where?” Mira asked.

“The slave trader Ansel is at Five Roads,” Cole said. “I can use my authority to find out where all the kids from my neighborhood ended up.”

“That could take some time, Cole,” Jace said. “And the slaver might not cooperate.”

“He for sure won’t cooperate if people think I kidnapped the king,” Cole said. “This could be my best chance.”

“Your best chance is stopping the end of the world,” Jace said. “If you find out where your friends are and the world ends, what was the point? If we stop Ramarro, you’ll have all kinds of help finding those kids.”

“Jace is right,” Mira said. “You have lots of people on your side, Cole. We’ll find your friends together.”

Cole wanted to argue. What if they stopped Ramarro, but the order of the kingdoms unraveled? What if the Pemberton family lost the power to help him? What if Ansel moved on, and they never found him again? But Jace’s position was too solid—what was the point of finding the kids from his neighborhood if Ramarro conquered the Outskirts? Locating Ansel and getting the information was risky and could cost precious time.

“I get it,” Cole said. “Ramarro first. Where should we go?”

“We’ll plan better in Creon,” Twitch said. “With our recent memories.”

“I know a place,” Violet said. She reached out a hand, and Cole took it. A waypoint shimmered into existence.

“Someplace safe?” Twitch asked.

“Safe as I know,” Violet said.

Cole stepped through, maintaining his connection to Violet until she came through last of all and the waypoint closed. They stood in a grove of trees near a huge lawn. A stately complex of buildings stood in the distance.

Memories awakened in Cole’s mind.

“We went into the Iron Fort in the desert,” Jace said.

“It was comfortable inside,” Twitch said. “Except for the strict guards.”

“Elegance isn’t joining us,” Mira said. “At least not for now.”

“Should we go tell the Host about the king and queen?” Cole asked.

“We’ll tell him when it makes sense to go back there,” Jace said. “We’re not his errand boys.”

“Or girls,” Violet added.

“Where are we?” Cole wondered.

“That was my first wayminding school,” Violet said. “I grew up in a quiet region of Creon called Twin Lakes. We should be safe here for a moment.”

Mira held up the rolled parchment. “I can read this now.”

“It’s permission to go back to the Iron Fort,” Jace said.

“I know,” Mira said. “But so weird that it’s now perfectly legible. It looked like nonsense hardly a minute ago.”

“Should we chase down Lorenzo?” Jace said. “Where was he again?”

“North of the forgotten cache at Shepherd’s Grove,” Violet said. “I hope those directions are more specific than they sound. How far north? A hundred paces? A mile north? Ten miles? Fifty? How directly north? Straight north?”

“Hopefully, Lorenzo is close to the cache, or Dandalus would have used a better landmark,” Cole said.

“We should start at the cache and work northward,” Mira suggested.

“What’s the forgotten cache?” Twitch asked.

“Certain Wayminders used to transport merchandise, often from Earth,” Violet said. “Taking shortcuts across wide spaces can be useful in shipping. The items were stored in caches. A lot of the big caches closed down and were abandoned.”

“Did you just say there might be stuff to loot?” Jace asked.

“Old stuff people left behind,” Violet said. “The caches are technically off-limits.”

“I worked for a salvage operation,” Jace said. “Abandoned cargo is fair game.”

Violet shrugged. “In school we were told not to visit them. I’ll take us to the north side of the cache near Shepherd’s Grove. Cole, I’ll need a boost so I can see where we want to go.”

Cole took her hand and energized her power.

Violet gave a small gasp. “With your help I can see so clearly from here! Not clearly inside the cache. It’s shielded. But the borders of the cache are easy to make out. It’s big. There is an empty field toward the center of the north side.”

A wayport appeared.

Jace stepped through the glimmering portal. The others followed. Violet came through last.

Cole first noticed that it was cooler—almost cold enough to wish for a jacket when the frosty breeze slithered over him. Long grass and wild flowers extended before him, sloping up into a series of low hills fringed with evergreens. Turning, Cole found a tall metal fence topped with spikes. Through the fence he could see a stagecoach, a slot machine, a few department-store mannequins in outdated fashions, and an old biplane that made him think of World War I.

“That stuff is from my world,” Cole said.

“I wouldn’t know,” Violet replied.

“Does that fly?” Jace asked, pointing at the plane.

“If you know how,” Cole said. “And if it has fuel. And room to take off.”

“Makes me think of Zeropolis,” Jace said. “Cool tech. Does your world have good weapons?”

“Actually, yeah, we’re pretty good at weapons.”

“We have to go in there,” Jace said. “Violet, how about a way to the other side of the fence? Just a tiny hop?”

“These caches are off-limits,” Violet reminded him. “We’re in Creon! Are you trying to get me penalized?”

“If Owandell is playing this like the world is about to end, why can’t we?” Jace asked.

“In case it doesn’t,” Violet said. “And in case we get detained before we can try to stop Ramarro.”

“How tall is that fence?” Jace asked, looking up.

“About twenty feet,” Twitch said.

“Maybe there’s a gate,” Cole suggested.

Violet shook her head. “We’re in Creon. The caches were built to be secure. No gates. Anybody with permission to be inside would use a wayport.”

“And items would be moved in and out the same way,” Mira said.

Jace held his golden strand out to Cole. “A little help?”

“Is it smart to go in there?” Cole asked. “Dandalus told us Lorenzo Debray was north of here.”

“This was the only place named,” Jace said. “We should check it out. There may be clues.”

“Or awesome weapons from another world,” Twitch said knowingly.

“Is that so bad?” Jace asked. “We’re being hunted by Owandell. We’re trying

to stop a powerful torivor. Nobody wants better weapons?”

“Might be worth a look,” Mira said.

Cole touched the golden strand and energized it.

“I need some help,” Twitch said. “The ring that lets me take my true form outside of Elloweer only works in Sambria.”

Cole placed a hand on Twitch’s shoulder. Twitch’s shaping power felt dim—suppressed. Cole brightened it, and suddenly Twitch had grasshopper legs and antennae.

“You’re good,” Twitch said.

“Can you power all of us at the same time?” Mira asked, holding out her Jumping Sword.

Cole touched the flat of the blade and awoke the power inside. He drew his sword and energized it. “No problem. It’ll be a big jump over the fence. Don’t forget to jump again when you land.”

Mira grinned. “Don’t forget who introduced you to Jumping Swords.”

“How does my rope work again?” Jace asked with a smirk. “Twitch? Do you remember how to hop?”

“I can stand guard here,” Violet offered.

“Oh no,” Jace said. “If you’re too nervous to open a way in, I’ll bring you.” He turned his back to her. “Climb on.”

“Away,” Mira said, pointing her sword and leaping well over the fence. “Away,” she said again when she landed, taking a smaller jump forward before coming to a stop. Twitch sprang as well, wings fluttering, and easily cleared the fence.

Cole called out the command and enjoyed the rush of soaring up over the fence, including the brief weightlessness at the apex of his flight. With the added elevation, he glimpsed random objects from his world continuing into the distance. A school bus? A long glittery Chinese dragon? A McDonald’s?

Cole landed with a second little jump to dampen the impact. Jace landed beside him, the coils of his rope slowing his descent. Violet climbed down from his back.

“Now we’re trespassers,” Violet said.

“We’re not exactly burning down shrines or kidnapping royalty,” Jace said.

“I guess if our enemies play dirty, we may need to cross boundaries sometimes,” Violet said.

“You trespassed with us into a sky castle,” Jace reminded her.

“Yeah, but I’m from here,” Violet said. “I know the rules here.”

“How long can you keep me in my true form?” Twitch asked.

“As long as I keep sending power to you,” Cole said.

“Would it be easier to just charge up my ring?”

“I’d have to maintain that connection too,” Cole said.

“And you can hold the connection without touching me,” Twitch said. “Does that mean you could form the connection without touching me?”

“Maybe,” Cole said.

Cole released his connection to Twitch, who reverted to a human appearance. Reaching out with all of his focus, Cole could sense the shaping power within his friend. It was familiar. But could he touch that power without physically touching Twitch? Could he establish a connection from a distance?

Cole became aware of the others watching him. He closed his eyes and focused more intently on Twitch’s power. He could almost feel it. But no matter how hard he pushed, he fell short of connecting to it.

“Not right now,” Cole said. “Maybe if I practice.”

“My rope went limp,” Jace said.

Cole realized that he had broken his connections with Violet and everything else to concentrate on Twitch. “I was giving it my all.”

“It would be great if you could learn to do it,” Mira said.

Cole nodded. “A lot smoother in a fight if I don’t have to touch everything to power it up.”

“It’s already unreal,” Twitch said. “Nobody else can do what you do.”

“I bet Ramarro can,” Cole said. “And so much more.”

“Let’s find an incredible weapon from Cole’s world,” Jace said. “Something undefeatable.” He pointed. “Maybe that?”

“That’s a tuba,” Cole said. “It’s a musical instrument.”

“I get it,” Jace said. “Like a big horn. Who blows that thing? How big are their lungs?”

“Pretty hefty, I guess,” Cole said.

“Who is that guy?” Twitch asked, indicating a large reddish statue.

“I think that’s Buddha,” Cole said. “There are people on my planet who worship him.”

They set off through a jungle of random items. Cole noticed an old-fashioned gas pump, a stone birdbath, a bronze statue of a baseball player, a rickshaw, a simple wooden canoe, a tin washtub, and an Egyptian sarcophagus. He showed

the others how to wear the Chinese dragon and tried the door of the McDonald's, finding it locked. Putting his face to the glass, he could see tables and the counter and the menu. There was nobody inside and no sign of electricity, but otherwise it appeared an entire McDonald's had been transported to Creon intact.

"This is a restaurant in my world," Cole explained. "Not a fancy one. It's for when you're in a hurry. They serve hamburgers."

"Dalton showed me a hamburger once," Jace said. "An illusion."

"They're good," Cole said. "McDonald's isn't the ultimate, but they're popular for a reason. What's it doing here?"

"Want to break in?" Mira asked.

Cole shook his head. "It must have been here a while. No way is any food inside still good."

"Let's keep moving," Twitch suggested.

They passed more Earth paraphernalia large and small, ancient and modern. Cole noticed that nothing looked quite from his time period. The newest stuff seemed to be from at least thirty years ago. Maybe more.

"What's that?" Mira asked.

Cole looked ahead to a full carousel with horses and other animals on poles. "It's a carousel. A ride."

"Does it turn around?" Twitch asked.

"If it had power," Cole said. "Probably not here."

"You can power it," Jace suggested.

"I don't think so," Cole said. "It runs on a different kind of power called electricity."

They went to the carousel and climbed on. Cole stared at a white horse, head thrown back, motionless mane molded as if blowing in the wind. Fake jewels decorated the fanciful saddle and bridle.

"Your world is strange," Jace said, standing beside a big frog with a brass pole through it.

"Kind of strange, I guess," Cole admitted. "But also pretty fun."

"What do you kids think you're doing?" called a shrill voice.

Cole whirled to find a bony older woman coming toward them. She had frizzy gray hair and walked with a bouncy sway, almost like she was running in place. Cole glanced at the others in surprise and worry.

"Told you," Violet muttered.

## CHAPTER

# 15

## CACHE

Your ride doesn't work," Jace said, yanking on the pole through the frog.

The woman stared at him huffily, hands on her hips. "Shows what you know! Works just fine."

"It's supposed to spin around," Cole said.

Her gaze shifted to Cole. "I know what it does, young man. The question is, why have you hooligans entered uninvited? And with a Wayminder among you? Let me guess—the robes are stolen."

"It was her idea," Jace said. "She dared us."

Violet flushed and opened her mouth, but no words came out.

"We don't mean any harm," Mira said.

"Has all order been overthrown?" the old woman asked. "Are laws only meant for people who mean harm now? How exactly is that measured?"

"Turn it on," Jace said.

"Excuse me?" the woman asked.

"You claim it works," Jace said. "Prove it. Turn it on."

"Stop trying to tangle me, young man," the woman said. "How did you kids get here? There are no settlements nearby. Are you actually a Wayminder?"

Violet turned a shade redder. Cole could tell she wanted to disappear.

"Is she mute?" the woman asked. "I know somebody opened a wayport north of the fence. I've seen a few winters, but not all of my senses have fled yet."

"She's shy," Cole said. "We pushed her into coming here."

"Kidnapped you, did they?" the woman asked.

"I volunteered," Violet admitted.

"What's the punishment for trespassing?" Jace asked. "Do you really care? Isn't this ride going to waste with nobody to play on it? What's the use of all this junk with nobody here?"



“These artifacts were collected over many years,” the woman said. “That carousel is unique in all the Outskirts.”

“Not as unique where I’m from,” Cole said.

“Am I supposed to believe you’re from Outside?” the woman asked. “Do you think that gives you a claim on this collection?”

“Maybe,” Cole said. “My friends were stolen from our world. How did this stuff get here?”

“The world walkers acquired these pieces over long years,” the woman said.

“World walkers?” Violet asked.

The woman waved her hands as if swatting away gnats. “Now you’ve got me talking about history better left unmentioned.”

“You should be glad we’re here,” Jace said. “Isn’t a collection meant to be viewed? This place looks abandoned. Does anyone else work here?”

“I’m alone here sometimes,” the woman said. “I have help at times too. I can call security, and they’ll be here in no time. Then you’ll wish I hadn’t.”

“Don’t get us in trouble,” Cole said. “We’re just curious. Does the carousel really work? Wouldn’t it need electricity?”

“We bring it in direct from Earth using—” She placed a hand over her mouth, then removed it. “You kids are good at getting me talking.”

“I bet it doesn’t work,” Jace said. “I know a bluff when I see one.”

The woman pointed at him. “I know what you’re doing, and it won’t work.”

“Jace has a point,” Cole said. “What use is a carousel without people to ride it?”

The woman folded her arms. Then unfolded them. “It is a piece of foreign culture.”

“Meant to have riders,” Cole said.

The woman sighed. “It’s been some time since I let it spin. Okay, how about this arrangement? I let you ride, then you leave and swear to tell nobody you came here.”

“I can live with that,” Mira said.

“Maybe I can as well,” the woman said. “You seem all right. First tell me what prompted your interest in this place? We’ve discouraged interest in the caches enough that few in your generation care they exist.”

Cole decided to take a risk. “We’re looking for somebody.”

All heads turned to him.

“Not me, I take it,” the woman said. “Who could you possibly be looking for

here?"

"Lorenzo Debray," Cole said.

Her face clearly registered worried surprise before she covered the reaction. She forced an awkward chuckle. "Now you're getting absurd."

"Are we?" Mira asked. "Creon is in danger, and we need to find him."

"What sort of danger?" the woman asked.

"We can't get too specific," Cole said. "But it involves stopping a torivor."

The woman looked perplexed. "Trillian remains safe inside—"

"Not him," Cole said. "Ramarro."

The woman nodded. "You realize Lorenzo Debray was a Grand Shaper hundreds of years ago."

"Yes, and he's in hiding near here," Cole said.

The woman shook her head. "I've never met a crazier troop of rascals. You're all far too fond of nonsense."

"The world walkers collected these things from Outside?" Violet asked.

"No more of that talk," the woman said. "The world walkers were officially disbanded more than sixty years ago. Their unofficial excursions tapered off roughly twenty years ago. Those in charge questioned the ethics of securing these items and the propriety of too much attention fixed outside our world."

"Then this stuff is just junk," Jace said. "Relics from an abandoned project."

"A few of us still find value here," the woman said. "We're allowed to curate the caches as long as we keep them closed to the public. So your presence endangers my life's work."

"Were you a world walker?" Twitch asked.

"I have worked with some of the best of them," the woman said. "And I keep talking too much! I must be lonelier than I realized! One ride, then you depart, lips sealed."

"We'll depart and look for Lorenzo Debray," Cole said.

"Why not find Kendo Rattan while you're at it?" the woman asked.

"We expect to," Cole said. "One step at a time."

The woman threw up her hands as if the discussion was hopeless and teetered over to a shed. She unlocked the door and went inside.

"Did you see her face when you mentioned Lorenzo Debray?" Mira whispered. "She knows something."

"Seemed like it," Jace whispered.

"Think she'll help us?" Cole asked.

“Depends if we can get her to trust us,” Mira whispered. “The location of Lorenzo Debray is an enormous secret. She has to be good at keeping it.”

Thousands of light bulbs came on all over the carousel. Music began to play, and it slowly started to turn.

“It works,” Jace said with a smile. He rummaged in a satchel, pulled out the hat he got in Zeropolis, and put it on.

“Grab something to ride,” Cole said. “Make sure your pole connects to the crank at the top or it won’t go up and down.”

Everyone claimed a mount as the carousel sped up. The old woman exited the shed and watched, a smile on her lips.

Cole looked back at Jace, eyes closed, grinning, his tiger rising and falling. He opened his eyes and took off his hat, waving it in the air.

“You love that hat,” Cole called.

“Perfect for holidays,” Jace replied.

Cole could not help imagining life as a slave—a life without holidays. He realized he couldn’t even begin to understand what it was really like for someone who had spent their whole life that way.

Mira laughed on her horse. Twitch bobbed up and down on a colorful rooster, trying to look in every direction at once, soaking in the experience. Violet contentedly held the pole above her dolphin with both hands.

“Had enough?” the old woman called as they passed her.

“Nobody is waiting for a turn,” Cole called back. “Keep it going!”

Something slammed into Cole and constricted around him, knocking him from his horse. He fell short of hitting the floor of the carousel. It took Cole a moment to recognize the crisscross pattern of a net pressed to his face, and enveloping the rest of him as well. He hung, trapped, off the side of his horse, head lower than his feet, unable to do more than barely squirm.

“Run!” Jace shouted over the chiming music.

Cole struggled fruitlessly. The world scrolled by as the carousel spun. In flashes from his awkward dangling position, Cole saw his friends scrambling and Enforcers approaching. They had been ambushed.

Cole had no connection to Violet, Twitch, or any of the weapons. He reached out but could not get a sense for where his friends were, let alone connect to their powers.

Then Jace was at his side, hatless, thrusting the golden strand against his shoulder. “Quick,” Jace said.

“My hands,” Cole said.

But both hands were trapped between his chest and the side of the horse.

“Hurry,” Jace said, holding the golden strand against his elbow, as close to Cole’s hands as he could manage.

Cole fought to make his hands available. He also tried to feel the power of the rope through his sleeve. And then Jace was yanked away. An Enforcer stood in his place.

Cole redoubled his effort to remotely connect to the golden rope. If only he could energize the rope, Jace could probably handle the Enforcers. But Cole could establish no connection.

The carousel slowed to a stop. The music continued, and the lights remained on. Hands detached Cole’s net from the horse. Somebody seized Cole’s feet, dragged him to the edge of the carousel, and swung him off. Still hopelessly ensnared in the net, he landed in the dust, shoulder first, and did his best to absorb the impact by rolling.

The net shrank around him, constricting so tight that Cole could barely breathe. From his helpless position on the ground, Cole watched the Enforcers round up his friends. Mira wielded her Jumping Sword against an Enforcer with four arms. Without energy from Cole the sword was useless for jumping. The Enforcer outfought her with a pair of long knives and knocked the sword from her grasp.

Another Enforcer moved with supernatural speed, first hurling Jace to the ground, then tracking down Twitch, who had tried to run off. Violet surrendered without a fight.

Soon all his friends lay on the ground as well, hands bound. Cole counted a total of five Enforcers. The old woman seemed to have disappeared. Could she have slipped into the shed?

“Keep them away from Cole,” the fast Enforcer said. “Jermaine, where’s our wayport? Let’s get them to the boss.”

“Having a little trouble,” Jermaine said. “I tried to hold our wayport open, but it collapsed.”

“That’s why we have two Wayminders,” the fast Enforcer said. “Eric?”

“The cache must be shielded,” Eric said. “I can’t open anything here. We may have to take them outside the fence.”

“Not much of a fight,” the Enforcer with four arms said. “Any two of us could have handled this.”

“We had good intelligence,” the fast Enforcer said. “Isolate Cole. Nice work, Carson. Easy job after that.”

“It was a solid plan, Lars,” Carson said.

Cole miserably strained against the squeeze of the net. The Enforcers were right. Without him to energize the others, they had been easy prey.

“What kind of net is that?” Mira asked. “Looks really tight.”

“Never you mind,” Lars said. “No talking. Boys, what is the best way to convey them outside the fence?”

Mira stared purposefully at Cole. She was right! The net was supernaturally tight. Sure enough, he could sense shaping power in it. Pressing his hands against the confining strands, he connected to the power.

How was it energized? The power in the net felt like Sambrian shaping. Could somebody else energize objects to work outside their proper kingdoms? No. The power originated with one of the Enforcers. The guy called Carson. He wasn't energizing power inherent to the net. He was using Sambrian shaping to directly control it. Carson's power had been mangled by shapecrafters to allow his Sambrian shaping to work in Creon.

Cole knew he needed to act decisively. It would be easy to block Carson's power from controlling the net. With the net's embrace loosened, Cole might be able to move. But better if he could shake Carson up along with it.

Using his connection with the power guiding the net, Cole traced the power back to its origin. Gritting his teeth, Cole connected directly to Carson's power. Not to energize it. To tear it apart.

Carson screamed and fell.

The net slackened.

Cole pushed a hand free. Lars stood nearest, and Cole grabbed his ankle. Cole felt his shaping power more distinctly than Carson's. It was marred throughout, tangled with darkness. Without the darkness, it felt Ellowine.

Pushing with all his might, Cole burned away the darkness. Lars cried out and collapsed.

Flailing to free himself from the net, Cole lunged over to Jace. The other Enforcers looked stunned. Cole took the golden strand from Jace's bound hands and forced energy into it.

The four-armed guy charged, but Cole quickly ensnared him with the rope, then used the contact to find the man's power. With a mighty surge of energy,

Cole burned away the darkness throughout his power. Two of the man's arms disappeared.

Cole swung the stunned man violently into Eric. They connected with a clang of armor and a crunch of bone. Lars returned to his feet, looking shaky.

Cole drew his Jumping Sword and forced energy into it. "Surrender or you're all going to die," he warned.

Jermaine charged forward, sword in hand. Cole snared his ankles with the golden rope and whipped him into the air.

Crouching, Lars set down his weapon and raised both hands. "This is over. Stand down."

"What did you do to me?" Carson asked with a miserable groan.

"He went right to your power," Lars said. "Went straight to mine, too."

Eric and the other Enforcer remained motionless. Cole flopped Jermaine onto the ground, not gently, and retracted the rope.

"On your faces," Cole said.

The Enforcers who could move complied.

"No shapecrafter can connect to your power that easily," Carson said, his voice still unsteady.

"They warned us he was good," Lars said. "I didn't think of him using the net to get to you. What did you do to me? I can't feel my power."

"I healed you," Cole said. "Took away all the shapecrafting done to you."

"No fooling," Lars said with some admiration. "That quickly? I know shapecrafters who can adjust modifications to your power. I don't know anyone who can simply undo them."

"Seemed like the fastest way to take away your shaping here," Cole said, using his Jumping Sword to carefully cut Jace's cords. "It'll still work back in Elloweer."

"You didn't do that to me," Carson said. "I feel . . . wrong inside."

"I'd say sorry," Cole said, "but you were trying to capture us." The cords fell away from Jace's wrists, and Cole passed him the sword. Jace started freeing the others.

"You followed my power through the net and back to me?" Carson asked. "Who does that?"

"The guy who is going to stop Ramarro," Cole said.

"Who?" Lars asked.

"Ramarro," Cole said. "You call him Nazeem."

“What?” Carson asked.

“You guys don’t even know who you’re following?” Jace asked.

“Explain,” Lars said.

“Your leader is the torivor Ramarro,” Cole said. “Going under the name Nazeem.”

“You’re like those poor suckers who fall under Trillian’s power,” Mira said.

“Who do you think taught Owandell to mess with the shaping power?” Cole asked. He crossed to Carson. Crouching, Cole touched the back of his neck. The Enforcer’s shaping power was not only marred with darkness but torn, almost scrambled. “I really hurt your power.”

“You’re telling me,” Carson said. “I feel some of the results physically. Like I’m permanently dizzy. It’s turning to nausea.”

Cole engaged with Carson’s power, gently healing it, and then burned away the darkness. It wasn’t very difficult.

“You fixed it,” Carson said. “All of it.”

“You can feel your power,” Cole said. “But you can’t use it here.”

“Yes,” Carson said.

“Don’t let them maim you again,” Cole said. “Jermaine, hold still.”

“I’m a Wayminder,” Jermaine said, facedown. “My shaping power belongs here.”

“I’m going to check you,” Cole said, touching the back of his head. His power was mangled, with darkness woven into it. “What did they do to you?”

“Boosted my abilities,” Jermaine said. “I can open wayports more frequently than most.”

With an effort of will, Cole burned away the darkness. “Not anymore. But your shaping is whole.”

Cole went over to Eric and to the Enforcer who formerly had four arms, who was perfectly still. He didn’t seem to be breathing. Cole reminded himself that, like the others, that man had been ready to do harm to Cole and his friends.

Eric groaned as Cole approached. “Stay away.”

“Hold still or I’ll smash you around again,” Cole said, touching his neck. He burned away the darkness.

“Enough of this,” a shrill voice called.

Cole turned to find the old woman approaching. He held the golden rope ready, just in case.

“Time to send our unwanted visitors on their way,” she said. A shimmering

wayport appeared. "Sorry if you find the destination inconvenient. Then again, you were never invited to trespass here."

"Does this include us?" Violet asked.

"You were not invited either," the old woman said. "But I wouldn't send children to Outer Yurgo for wanting to ride a carousel. I refer to the Enforcers."

"You heard her," Jace said. "Head through the wayport. Be glad you're alive. Well, except the dead one."

"Wait," Mira said. "Do we want to use a couple of them to spread the word about Ramarro through the Enforcers?"

"There are surer channels," the old woman said. "These men will say whatever they can to get free, then double-cross you in a heartbeat."

"I didn't know we fought for a torivor," Lars said. "And we are an elite unit. If we didn't know, very few know."

"There are better channels," the old woman maintained.

"Into the wayport," Mira said.

"Help Eric," Cole suggested.

"I see that crossbow," the old woman said. "Leave your weapons."

"What about hunting?" Jermaine asked.

"Get creative," the old woman suggested.

Jermaine and Carson carried Eric into the wayport. Lars paused before stepping through and looked at Cole. "If you really are up against a torivor, good luck, kid."

"Like it or not, know it or not, we're all up against a torivor," Cole said.

"Maybe so," Lars said, then stepped through.

The wayport closed.

The old woman crouched over the Enforcer who used to have four arms. "He's not pretending." She raised her voice. "All clear."

A man came out of the shed. Clad in the robes of a Wayminder, he had long hair knotted atop his head and a short beard that followed the edge of his jaw.

"Greetings," he said. "I understand you're looking for Lorenzo Debray. I am he."



## CHAPTER

# 16

## HIDDEN

I pictured him older,” Jace murmured to Mira.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Lorenzo said.

Violet looked like she was about to pass out. “Are you really Lorenzo Debray?”

“Fair question,” Lorenzo said. “You’re all involved in some high-stakes trouble. You can’t afford to get duped by an imposter.”

“Can you prove who you are?” Jace asked.

Lorenzo held up a hand, and Jace became motionless.

“Your friend is unharmed,” Lorenzo said. “He is now experiencing time in an unusual way. Not many Wayminders can accomplish this.”

“Nobody can do that,” Violet said.

“Not many,” Lorenzo replied. He waved a hand, and Jace could move again. “Edna informed me that you had come to look for me, and then Enforcers attacked you. I came to survey the situation.”

“How did she inform you?” Twitch wondered.

“I opened a wayport to him,” the old woman said.

“You’re a Wayminder too?” Cole asked.

“Yes, though opening ways here in the cache is easy,” the old woman said. “Especially if you belong here. Numberless shortcuts have been established over the years.”

“Their unfamiliarity with the protections here hampered the Enforcers,” Lorenzo said. “I closed their wayport and prevented them from opening a new one. I thought I would have to rescue you, but then you saved yourselves. I must say, Cole, your abilities are extraordinary.”

“Lorenzo Debray knows your name,” Violet mumbled in awe.

“I heard the Enforcers use it,” Lorenzo said. “And I sensed what he did. So impressive. Are you really trying to stop a torivor?”

“We need help,” Cole said.

Lorenzo held up a hand. “Say no more. Come to my lair. We can speak freely there.”

A wayport opened.

“We were worried we wouldn’t find you,” Mira said.

Lorenzo gave a nod. “You have found me. Please, after you.”

Jace went first. Then Mira. Cole followed.

He stepped through the wayport into a large, underground chamber, rectangular as the inside of a box, the rock walls, ceiling, and floor unnaturally smooth, the corners perfect. Despite the subterranean appearance, it had been turned into a home. Furniture abounded, and rugs softened the floor. Several lamps lit the space. Taking a closer look, Cole found electric light bulbs inside them.

“These are from my world,” Cole said.

Lorenzo had come through after Violet and Twitch and closed the wayport. Edna had not joined them. “This surprises you after riding a carousel?”

“Good point,” Cole said.

“How deep are we?” Twitch asked.

“Well below the surface,” Lorenzo said. “None will find us here.”

“North of the cache?” Mira asked.

“Some distance north, yes,” Lorenzo said.

“We had directions to you,” she said.

“Who told you this?” Lorenzo asked.

“Dandalus,” Cole said.

“Dandalus has moved on,” Lorenzo said.

“His echo,” Cole clarified. “We worked with him in the echolands.”

“Not much can be hidden from Dandalus,” Lorenzo said.

“This cave doesn’t look . . . natural,” Twitch said.

“It isn’t,” Lorenzo said. “I removed the rock myself.”

“With wayminding?” Violet asked, astonished.

“A form of wayminding like the world walkers used,” Lorenzo said. “Transporting inanimate matter through spatial manipulation.”

“This place doesn’t connect to the outside,” Jace said.

“Exactly,” Lorenzo replied. “I ventilate and regulate the temperature with

tiny wayports. This hideaway is heavily shielded against snoopY Wayminders. The best of the best would have a tough time finding it.”

“How did Dandalus think we would find you?” Cole asked.

Lorenzo shrugged. “If he somehow knew I was here, he may have assumed I keep an eye on the surface. I do. He may have figured a group of kids out of place would attract my attention. It would have. And it did. Tell me about Ramarro.”

“He was imprisoned in the echolands,” Cole said. “He recently got loose, but an impression of Dandalus in the Founding Stone helped me redirect Ramarro to a prison in Creon—a vault called the Void.”

“You’re speaking about legends,” Lorenzo said. “Dandalus, Ramarro, and the Void.”

“We have to find the Void,” Cole said. “Dandalus feels sure it won’t hold Ramarro for long. We have to either keep Ramarro in prison, invent a better prison, or figure out a way to defeat a torivor.”

Lorenzo sighed. “This is grim. We’re probably all going to die.”

“We all die anyhow if Ramarro gets free,” Cole said. “I’ve been to the echolands. Death isn’t so bad. And whatever lies beyond the echolands feels appealing.”

“Fair assessment,” Lorenzo said. “Is the torivor as bad as the legends maintain?”

“Seems like it,” Cole said. “Dandalus agreed.”

“We don’t want to face it head-on,” Lorenzo said. “But how do you imprison something that can escape the echolands and the Void?”

“Trillian is still bound,” Mira said.

“Trillian was mostly defeated when they imprisoned him,” Lorenzo said. “If we could defeat Ramarro, it might open up options. But I’m not sure that is possible. And I don’t know the specifics of how Trillian was contained. I’m hundreds of years old, but the torivors preceded me by a significant margin.”

“Can we find Kendo Rattan?” Jace asked.

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” Lorenzo said. “Shouldn’t he be long gone?”

“Shouldn’t you?” Jace countered.

“Valid observation,” Lorenzo said. “But Kendo Rattan predates me by centuries. He helped create the five kingdoms.”

“Dandalus told us he might be around,” Cole said. “I guess most of the Grand Shapers of Creon gained power over death.”

Lorenzo took a slow breath. “You have been told our deepest mysteries, secrets we have killed to protect. In some ways I’m glad. It confirms the gravity of your errand.”

“So we can find Kendo Rattan?” Violet asked.

“I cannot be sure of his present location,” Lorenzo said. “He has appeared to most, if not all, of the Grand Shapers of Creon after they retire. Never while they remain in office.”

“When did you last see him?” Cole asked.

“It has been some time,” Lorenzo said. “Kendo could be dead. Wherever he is today, he is beyond our reach unless he wants to be found. But . . . this is an emergency, so we are not necessarily limited to finding him today.”

“You mean time travel,” Violet gushed.

“I do,” Lorenzo said.

“Can you just send us back to one of your previous meetings with Kendo?” Twitch asked.

“Unfortunately, by Kendo’s design, all of those meetings occurred in shielded locations,” Lorenzo said. “I can’t get you to any of those conferences. I don’t know where they happened. But I know my history, and there are a few places where you may be able to interact with Kendo Rattan after he created the Void.”

“Why not before he created the Void?” Cole asked. “We could warn him to make it stronger.”

Lorenzo smiled sadly. “You are powerful. And so young. You have not traveled through time before?”

Cole shook his head.

“And you know little of Creon?”

Cole nodded.

“You need some fundamentals,” Lorenzo said. “First, the past is fixed. You cannot go back in time and change the past. If you do, you will only discover that you become part of the past as it already happened.”

“What if I went back in time and killed you when you were a baby?” Jace asked.

Everyone stared at him.

“Not that I would,” Jace clarified hastily. “For the sake of argument. I mean, how could you stop me if you were just a little baby?”

“I wouldn’t have to stop you,” Lorenzo said. “I’m here. I didn’t die as a baby.”

It didn't happen. The past is fixed. You would somehow fail. You could make mistakes. Someone might intervene. You might change your mind. You might even inadvertently save my life. In the end any attempt you made to alter the past would become part of the past as it already transpired."

"But if I went to the past, wouldn't I be a new addition to what happened?" Cole asked. "Couldn't I change the outcome from whatever happened before I went there? I'm just thinking out loud. I want to understand."

"If you visit the past, there is no other past without your visit," Lorenzo said. "The past you visited would be new to you, but it already happened with you in it. You'd just be the last to know. All that already occurred is inevitable. You can't avoid it."

"There's no way around it?" Cole asked.

"People have tried," Lorenzo said. "The theory is sound, but hundreds of attempts have been made to disprove the concept and alter the past. They always fail."

"What if I read in a history book that I died in the past, so I never go?" Jace asked.

"Then either the history was wrong, or you will change your mind and go, or you will somehow get sent to the past," Lorenzo said. "Those of us who journey to the past are few, and we try to do so unobtrusively. We sometimes get caught up in events, but we are there to learn, never to change anything."

"Because you can't," Twitch said.

"No more than I could break any other fundamental law," Lorenzo said.

"Laws get broken all the time in the Outskirts," Cole objected. "You can travel back in time. That seems like breaking a fundamental law."

"You must remember that the Outskirts was constructed in an eternal realm," Lorenzo said. "Many of the laws here are not natural—they were shaped. Certain aspects of those laws are vulnerable to tampering. Some are not. Once you establish sequence, the past is the past."

"It seems like if you can go to the past, you can change it," Cole said.

"It seems that way because you don't understand life in four dimensions," Lorenzo said. "You are imagining multiple pasts. A past with you and a past without you. The past is singular. I already told you, if you go to the past, you were part of it. It's hard to help you see the concept more clearly. It's like trying to explain life in three dimensions to somebody living in two."

"Could shapecrafters warp the fundamental rules and change history?" Jace

asked.

Lorenzo shook his head. "If they could, they would have not only surpassed my capabilities, but they would have exceeded what my wildest imaginings consider possible."

"Why go back in time if we can't change history?" Jace asked.

"Like he told us," Violet said. "To learn."

"Yes," Lorenzo agreed. "You could meet with Kendo Rattan and possibly acquire information that you could later use in the present."

"Like where to find the Void," Cole said.

"Or how to strengthen it," Mira added.

"Who knows what you might discover?" Lorenzo said. "Considering the desperate need, I believe it is worth a try."

"Won't it be hard to find him?" Violet asked.

Lorenzo gave a nod. "At least one of you is familiar with Creon."

"Why is it hard?" Cole asked.

"Lots of people would like to meet Kendo Rattan," Violet said. "Or Lorenzo Debray," she quickly added. "Any of the former Grand Shapers, really. So they keep a low profile. They were hard to find when they were alive, and their specific appearances are not recorded in any histories I know about. Their deeds and accomplishments, sure, but not specific dates synced with places."

"The Grand Shapers of Creon are experts at not being found," Lorenzo said. "That includes by time travelers. But I happen to know a place and time visited by Kendo Rattan."

"When?" Violet asked.

"The dedication of the Halbbrook School of Wayminding," Lorenzo said. "It was the first school of wayminding in the region, founded by the Grand Shaper Kili Felks, one of Kendo's favorite apprentices. He did not reveal himself to her. But he was in the crowd. After her retirement he told her about it. And he mentioned it to me."

"Can we find Kendo in a crowd?" Cole asked.

"Not if he chooses to avoid you," Lorenzo said. "Kendo is extremely in tune with his surroundings. He can disappear in a blink. He will be aware that you are from another time. He will be intrigued that you are young. And if we can introduce the problem of Ramarro somehow, he will almost surely engage you. He once told me that the two torivors are the biggest threat to the security of

the five kingdoms. And Kendo Rattan dedicated his life to protecting the five kingdoms.”

“How do we alert him about Ramarro?” Jace asked. “Would he overhear if we spoke about him? Should we wear signs?”

“Whatever you do needs to work,” Lorenzo said. “You can’t inhabit the same time in Creon more than once.”

“Do you know other times when Kendo Rattan appeared?” Mira asked.

“I could make some educated guesses,” Lorenzo said. “The Halbrook School dedication is our best chance. If you fail there, you may never make contact with him.”

“Could you come with us?” Cole asked.

“I was already alive then,” Lorenzo said. “I was not yet a Grand Shaper. Just a young Wayminder developing my abilities. I cannot return to a time I inhabited. I want to know more about you five. How did you become our defense against a torivor? I understand that Cole has unusual power. It’s strange that you are all so young.”

“I’m Jace. I used to be a slave owned by the Sky Raiders in Sambria, just like Twitch, Cole, and Mira. I’m free now.” He held up his freemark. “The Grand Shaper of Sambria took care of that for me. I’ve traveled with these guys ever since.”

“I’m Miracle Pemberton.”

“As in one of the lost princesses?” Lorenzo asked, surprised.

“My father drove me into exile when he took my shaping powers. My friends helped me get them back, and we learned about Owandell and the shapecrafters. We have restored the powers to all of my sisters except Elegance.”

“How are your shaping powers?” Lorenzo asked.

“Strengthening,” Mira said. “I haven’t had much chance to test them.”

“As I understand it, Cole could help you try them,” Lorenzo said. “Even here.”

“True,” Mira said.

Lorenzo looked at Twitch.

“I’m Twitch. Ruben, really. I’m one of the grinaldi in Elloweer. I’m basically here by mistake.”

“You escaped from the Sky Raiders with Jace, Mira, and Cole?” Lorenzo asked.

“Yes,” Twitch said.

“Twitch has saved my life,” Cole said. “He’s a lot more clever than he admits.”

“Not admitting your cleverness is much cleverer than the alternative,” Lorenzo said. He turned to Violet. “And what about you?”

“I’m the newest addition to the group,” Violet said. “They needed to go to Creon, so a Wayminder was required. Queen Harmony partnered me with them.”

“You’re young to be a Wayminder,” Lorenzo said.

“I passed the trials six weeks after my thirteenth birthday,” Violet said.

“Extraordinary,” Lorenzo said. “That is younger than I was when I passed them. How old are you now?”

“Nearly fifteen,” Violet said.

“So in one sense you are the eldest,” Lorenzo said, his eyes straying to Mira.

“Except I have been eleven for decades,” Mira said.

“I know the feeling of suspending your age,” Lorenzo said. “You are aging normally now.”

“Ever since my powers were restored,” Mira said.

“And you serve the queen, Violet?”

“I do,” Violet said. “I’m worried about her. She was taken, along with the king, and Honor and Destiny Pemberton as well.”

“Taken?” Lorenzo asked.

“They disappeared earlier today,” Mira said. “Some want to blame us because they know we were working with Violet. But we suspect Owandell used Wayminders willing to break the rules.”

Lorenzo nodded. “His Enforcers have grown bolder over the last several years. And recently they seem willing to cross any boundaries.”

“They think they’re about to take over the world,” Jace said.

“They’re partly right,” Cole said. “Ramarro will conquer the world if he gets free. But the shapecrafters will be his slaves just like everyone else will be.”

“Favored slaves, perhaps,” Lorenzo said. “I expect a clean death would be much more pleasant. What about you, Cole? What is your story?”

“I came here from Outside,” Cole said. “Arizona.”

“Phoenix area?” Lorenzo asked.

“Mesa,” Cole said. “You know it?”

“Well, after my retirement, I took command of the world walkers for a time,” Lorenzo said. “Expanded the operation. I take a great interest in your world.”

“So do some slavers,” Cole said. “A bunch of kids in my neighborhood were forced to come here. I followed to try to rescue them.”



“You came to the Outskirts deliberately,” Lorenzo said.

“Yes,” Cole said. “Accidentally, but deliberately. And I’ve been waiting to find a Grand Shaper from Creon.”

“You want to get home and stay there,” Lorenzo said.

Cole took a deep breath. “Is it possible?”

Lorenzo stroked his mouth. “This world is not designed to allow it. But there are rumors of a way.”

“Really?” Violet asked.

“Even Grand Shapers speak of it in whispers,” Lorenzo said. “Many with skepticism. We call it the Pilgrim Path. A true way back to temporal reality from an eternal realm. There is no knowledge of it ever working . . . but such knowledge would be difficult to obtain. Any who walk the Pilgrim Path can never return.”

“Do you think anyone has walked it?” Cole asked.

“A few Grand Shapers of Creon have died,” Lorenzo said. “The rest are in hiding, and most hide extremely well. There are at least two who seem to have vanished. Either they passed away quietly, they hid perfectly, or perhaps they walked the Pilgrim Path.”

“Could you do it?” Cole asked.

“I aspire to try someday,” Lorenzo said. “I don’t have the ability yet. I may never have it. Fortunately, you are trying to find the best man to ask in the history of the Outskirts. Kendo Rattan knows better than anyone if it can be done.”

“Should we get going?” Jace asked. “Time is against us.”

“Won’t it pause time if we go back?” Cole asked.

“A common misconception,” Lorenzo said. “You inevitably remain synced to your native timestream. If you go back a hundred years, spend a day there, and return, a day will have passed here. None have found a way around it.”

“And if we leave Creon?” Cole asked.

“When you leave Creon, you immediately return to your present point in the timestream,” Lorenzo said. “If you go back in time, spend three hours there, and then leave Creon, you will inescapably return to the present to find that three hours have elapsed.”

“All the more reason to hurry,” Jace said.

“I will do my best,” Lorenzo said. “Traveling back in time requires preparation. The longer you want to remain back in time, the more preparation

I need.”

“How long to be ready?” Cole asked.

“Several days to prepare, minimum,” Lorenzo said.

“Too long,” Cole said.

“What if you send only one of us?” Jace asked.

“That would help a little,” Lorenzo said. “The problem isn’t so much the number of travelers. You will all use the same wayport. Opening a way to the past requires an enormous amount of energy. And keeping you there takes additional effort. To be safe, I should send you back for at least six hours. If you want to risk it, I could try sending you for only an hour. But you’ll only get one chance within whatever time window we choose.”

“We can’t return to the same time more than once,” Cole remembered.

“Correct,” Lorenzo agreed.

“Once our time runs out, we get drawn back to the present?” Mira asked.

“Inevitably, yes,” Lorenzo said. “Just like you would get pulled back here if you spent too much time in Cole’s home world. Remaining out of sync from where you belong can only be maintained for a limited period.”

“Can we get back early?” Jace asked.

“If you were with a Wayminder who knew how to speed up the return,” Lorenzo said.

“Could I learn?” Violet asked.

“Have you time shifted?” Lorenzo asked.

“A little,” Violet said.

“Then it is possible,” Lorenzo said.

“You’ve gone back in time?” Jace asked, impressed.

“No,” Violet said. “Time shifting temporarily alters the flow of time for a person or an object. You can barely tell it has been done unless you’re a time-sensitive Wayminder. It’s a way to diagnose potential in young Wayminders.”

“Our big problem is we don’t have several days to wait,” Cole said. “We need to get back in time quickly. Lorenzo, what if I help you?”

“How?”

“What if I boost your energy?” Cole asked. “Could it maybe speed up the process?”

Lorenzo paused, looking at Cole uncertainly. “I’ve mastered the secret of perpetual youth—the skill a Grand Shaper of Creon must acquire to retire. I’ve

improved my abilities for hundreds of years. The power required for time travel surpasses what even the mightiest shapers of other disciplines can imagine.”

“Cole is amazing, though,” Violet said. “With his help, I can open a wayport anytime, anywhere, as frequently as I want.”

“You should try it at least,” Mira said.

Cole held out a hand. “See what you can do with me helping. If it doesn’t make a difference, no harm done.”

Lorenzo hesitated. “You won’t try to alter my power?”

“Have shapecrafters worked on you?” Cole asked.

Lorenzo looked offended. “Of course not. I don’t want anyone tampering with my nature.”

“I’ll just lend you energy,” Cole promised. “See if it helps.”

Lorenzo took his hand. The Wayminder’s power was spectacular—complex and brilliant. Cole started small, then began pouring power into him.

“Whoa,” Lorenzo said with wide eyes. “Easy, Cole, easy.”

Cole pushed more gently.

“Okay,” Lorenzo said. “I see. Yes. No wonder everyone is so interested in you. I expected a lot, but this is . . . unprecedented.” Lorenzo released his hand, then cocked his head. “You’re still connected to me.”

“I can hold the connection without touching,” Cole said. “I haven’t figured out how to establish it without contact yet.”

“I expect you will,” Lorenzo said. “The physical contact is just a crutch. Your power touching my power has very little to do with you touching me, as you can currently feel.”

“Right,” Cole said.

“I can get you where you want to go immediately,” Lorenzo said. “Give me one more big push.”

Cole flooded energy into Lorenzo, and his ears popped when a wayport appeared off to one side. Cole only had experience with shimmery, delicate wayports. This one was utterly black, like a wound in the fabric of reality.

## CHAPTER

# 17

## DEDICATION

**T**hat looks ominous,” Twitch said, walking around the dark gash in the air near the center of the room.

“You think baby bunnies look ominous,” Jace said.

Twitch blinked multiple times. “They could have germs.”

“It should look ominous,” Lorenzo said. “Time travel is no trifling matter. I suggest minimal interference in the past. Find Kendo Rattan, if you can, and learn all he will share. You’ll have at least twelve hours. I’ll talk with Violet about how to get you back early.”

“Can we all go?” Mira asked.

“You could, yes,” Lorenzo said. “As you please.”

“Mira should stay,” Jace said.

“No way,” Mira said. “If I’m there, Kendo Rattan will be more likely to help us.”

“He won’t know who you are,” Jace said.

“Probably true,” Lorenzo said. “Kendo Rattan was actually there when the dedication happened, not visiting the event from the future. But Mira’s status as a princess could carry some weight.”

“Would it make sense for some of us to stay back?” Cole asked. “If we can each only try this once? So we’ll have another chance?”

“If Kendo is going to avoid you, he will avoid you,” Lorenzo said. “If any of you could make a difference, it will happen whether you go now or later. I think whoever wishes to try should go together.”

“How do we signal him about Ramarro?” Cole asked.

“He’ll recognize that you’re from the future,” Lorenzo said. “It will undoubtedly draw his attention.”

“Pieces of parchment?” Mira proposed. “Some could say ‘Ram.’ Others ‘Arro.’”

“Simple,” Lorenzo said. “Serviceable. I like it.”

“We’re all going?” Jace asked.

“We’re in this together,” Mira said.

“Let me work with Violet for a moment,” Lorenzo said. “You see parchment on that desk. Pens as well. Feel free to make your signs.”

Lorenzo ushered Violet away while Mira claimed parchment and a pen. “How big?” she asked.

“Small,” Cole said. “Just big enough to be noticed. We don’t want to draw attention from anyone else.”

“What if we get asked about the words?” Twitch wondered.

“Play dumb?” Cole suggested.

“Tell them to mind their own affairs,” Mira said.

“You could start a fight,” Jace said.

“I’ll improvise,” Twitch said, accepting a slip of parchment from Mira. She handed out pieces to Cole and Jace.

“I guess we’ll spread out?” Mira asked.

“Probably,” Cole said. “It’ll give Kendo a better chance to notice us. And it will keep our paper messages away from each other.”

“What if he won’t help us?” Jace asked.

“We keep trying,” Cole said. “We do all we can.”

Jace nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right.”

“I understand the theory,” Violet said, returning with Lorenzo. Mira gave her a slip of parchment.

“With Cole energizing you, an early return could be possible,” Lorenzo said. “At the worst, you’ll only have to wait about twelve hours. The eventual summons to your proper time will happen naturally.”

“If Kendo helps us, he might be able to send us back,” Cole said.

“Kendo Rattan is my superior in every way,” Lorenzo said. “Let us hope for his aid. Are you ready? Unlike many wayports, once you cross through, you cannot return through the same portal.”

“Got it,” Jace said. “Time to go?”

“Anything else we should know?” Cole asked.

“A quick departure is better than prolonging this,” Lorenzo said. “I’m leaning on Cole’s power to hold the timeport open, but the effort remains strenuous.”

Cole should go through last.”

“I’ve never visited another time,” Violet gushed.

“None of us have,” Jace said. “Me first.”

He stepped into the blackness and vanished.

“Jace?” Twitch called.

“He can’t hear you,” Lorenzo said.

Twitch jumped through, followed by Violet and Mira.

“Thanks,” Cole said to Lorenzo. “See you soon.”

It felt to Cole like stepping through a thin, perfectly even waterfall. Instead of getting wet, his skin tingled as the unseen membrane parted to receive him.

And then Cole stood in a narrow, empty ally beside his friends. The sun was much too high in the sky to correspond to the day he had left behind. A trickle of water ran down the middle of the alley before veering into a drain. A pile of melon rinds and wilted vegetables moldered nearby.

Jace took a deep breath. “Does the past smell worse?”

“It does here,” Twitch muttered.

“Did it work?” Cole asked. “Are we in the past?”

“Lorenzo Debray sent us,” Violet said. “It must have worked.” She looked up at the walls with excited eyes, lips parting in a wide smile. “We’re in the past!”

“Then it’s long before any of us were born,” Mira said. “Even me.”

“Should we spread out?” Twitch asked.

“Not a lot of room,” Jace observed.

“I’m sure he sent us here to disguise our arrival,” Violet said. “I bet it’s the nearest empty outdoor space to the event.”

“Should we leave the alley and spread out?” Twitch clarified.

“Will the school be hard to find?” Cole asked.

“Big granite building,” Violet said. “Look for a crowd. Or ask about the dedication.”

“I’ll go first,” Jace said, trotting toward the open end of the alley.

“Meet back here?” Mira asked.

“Unless we find each other elsewhere,” Jace called over his shoulder.

Violet hugged herself and looked around. “We’re in a different century.”

“It seems really normal,” Cole said.

“We’re in the same kingdom,” Violet said. “I’ve been to the town of Halbbrook. Or I will come here someday, if you look at it that way.”

“If coming here is in your past, you’ve been here,” Cole said.

“Makes sense,” Violet agreed.

“Bye,” Mira said, walking away from them.

Cole snapped his fingers. “Jace’s rope! I wanted to try and power it up.”

“You can connect to me,” Violet said, holding out her arm.

Cole extended a hand toward her, then paused. “Lorenzo told me I don’t need to touch you.” He searched for her power and began to faintly sense it. Reaching out mentally, he tried to connect, but it was slippery.

“Be careful,” Twitch said, going down the alley.

Cole grabbed Violet’s wrist and instantly made the connection, brightening her power. “I’ll try to stay linked to you.”

“Do your best,” Violet said.

“Want me to go last?” Cole asked.

“Sure,” Violet said. She started down the alley, then glanced back. “Soak it in. Few get this opportunity.”

Cole watched her pass out of view. The alley failed to impress him. All of the Outskirts except Zeropolis seemed back in time to him. Swords and wagons. He was now further back in time, but there was nothing to emphasize the reality.

He walked to the end of the alley and took a deep breath. There was nothing noteworthy about the air, except that he was away from the moldy vegetables. The street at the end of the alley was narrow, without many people. Cole chose a direction and intersected a larger street with a lot of foot traffic. Many wore Wayminder robes. Most of the others wore tunics. He didn’t see anyone with a shirt and trousers like he had on and wondered how conspicuous they made him.

The Wayminders all seemed to flow in the same direction, so Cole followed them. After turning onto another street, Cole found a crowded square filled mostly with Wayminders, everyone facing a huge stone building with numerous fluted pillars. On the far side of the street Cole saw Violet, and up ahead he noticed Mira.

The assembled Wayminders milled and talked as their numbers swelled. Here and there wayports opened, and new Wayminders joined the assembly. No ceremony had begun yet. Cole wondered how early he was.

“Excuse me,” a voice said over Cole’s shoulder.

He turned to find a short man with reddish hair and Asian features walking behind him. “Yeah?”

“This is an awkward question, but are you bearing tidings about Ramarro?”

Cole stopped walking. "Kendo Rattan?" he whispered.

"I know the name," the man said. "Who sent you?"

"Lorenzo Debray," Cole said.

"I have not met him yet," the man said. "What is the message?"

"Are you Kendo?"

"You came looking for me?"

"Yes."

"How did you know to find me here?"

"Lorenzo."

"May I ask how he knew?"

"I think you told him," Cole said.

"Did I really?" Kendo asked. "That is not how I normally operate."

"He is a former Grand Shaper of Creon. Not yet, though. He will be."

"Perhaps if I had a purpose, I would let such a person contact me in the past," Kendo said. "You are far from your proper time. And you are not native to the Outskirts."

"I have to stop Ramarro," Cole said.

"Why you?" Kendo asked.

"Lots of reasons," Cole said. "I have special abilities."

"Yes, you do," Kendo said. "Glad you mentioned it. I didn't want to be rude. Your power is hard to miss. Unique, I would say."

"Dandalus told me I need to stop the torivor," Cole said.

"Dandalus is long gone in the present day," Kendo said. "Let alone when you are from."

"He left an imprint of himself in the Founding Stone," Cole said. "And I met his echo."

"Fascinating," Kendo said. "What is the threat?"

"Ramarro escaped the echolands," Cole said. "He used a piece of the Founding Stone. The imprint of Dandalus managed to trap him in the vault you made."

Kendo puffed his cheeks and blew out. "You know far too many secrets, young one. Almost more than I do. In your time, my Void is currently holding Ramarro?"

"Yes," Cole said. "Is there any way we can strengthen it?"

"I made it as strong as I could," Kendo said. "I violated some of the laws I established for Creon to do so, bending the rules as far as I knew how. The Void



is my ultimate prison. It would hold almost anyone indefinitely. And it is utterly insufficient to contain a torivor.”

“How long will it hold him?” Cole asked.

“How long has it held him?” Kendo replied.

“A few days,” Cole said.

Kendo nodded. “If it held him for more than an hour, the Void will probably hold him for a few more days. Not weeks. Days. A little over a week maybe.”

“You can’t make it stronger?” Cole asked.

“Not unless between now and then I learn groundbreaking information about the kingdom I personally designed,” Kendo said. “And you are?”

“Cole.”

“Pardon the bluntness, but is this a trap?” Kendo asked.

“What?”

“A trap to capture or harm me,” Kendo said. “I greatly prefer honesty. In the long run it always simplifies matters and saves time.”

“This isn’t a trap.”

“It would be a good one,” Kendo said. “A secret issue I desperately care about. Delivered by children.”

“You don’t die today,” Cole said. “You still have to tell Lorenzo you’ll be here.”

“If you are here because I told him, it will happen,” Kendo said. “Of course, you could be lying. I’ve had misinformation from the future before. Maybe you heard that I die today. Maybe you came to do it. I can’t read the future.”

“I’m being honest,” Cole said.

“What do you want from me?” Kendo asked.

“Information,” Cole said. “How do we keep Ramarro imprisoned? How do we stop him if he gets free?”

“Happy to share what I can,” Kendo said. “The framers of the Outskirts built the best prisons we could to hold the torivors. Most of the framers are long gone now. Our greatest hope lies in keeping them inside those prisons. If Ramarro gets free, I’m not sure how to recapture him. You came with four others?”

“Yes,” Cole said.

“Would you like them to meet with us?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t mean to be pushy.”

“Can you teleport them here?” Cole asked.

“Easier and less conspicuous for you to speak to them,” Kendo said. A small disturbance appeared in the air in front of Cole’s lips. “Tell them to meet at the corner of the square by the goat statue.”

“Guys, I found him. Meet at the corner of the square by the big goat statue.” Cole could see the huge goat up ahead.

The disturbance vanished. “Good,” Kendo said. “Tell me about your power.”

As they walked toward the stone goat, Cole explained how he could make items work outside of the kingdoms where they were designed to function. He also explained how he could energize the abilities of others and burn away the darkness of shapecrafting.

“Truly unique,” Kendo said. “I am honored to meet you.”

“I’m honored too,” Cole said. “You’re famous.”

“I’m just a man who learned to outlive his time,” Kendo said.

“And who helped make a world,” Cole said.

“A fair imitation of a world, I’ll give it that,” Kendo said. “We all have our talents. Human beings tend to hastily decide that if they excel at something, they excel at everything. I try not to be one of them. I have plenty of flaws, and there is plenty I don’t know.”

Cole waved at his friends, who had all gathered at the goat. Violet looked at Kendo with crazed amazement.

“You are a young Wayminder,” Kendo told Violet.

“You’re the original Wayminder,” she said. “I’m not even worthy to talk to you.”

Kendo smiled uncomfortably. “Yet here we stand. As you see, I am only a man. A short one.”

Violet shook her head. “A giant. A legend. And you look so young.”

“When aging is halted, it halts,” Kendo said. He took in the group. “You are facing a terrible threat.”

“We’ve faced a lot,” Jace said. “But this tops them all.”

“Tell me of the perils of your time,” Kendo said.

Cole explained about Owandell and the shapecrafters. Mira told about losing her power. Jace filled in details about some of the fights.

“And now you hope I can help design a way to thwart the torivor,” Kendo said. He folded his arms and stared at the ground. “I hate to let people down. Especially when it will cause the end of the world.”

“We’re feeling the same stress,” Cole said.

Kendo grinned. "I suppose so. I have no definitive answer for you now. But I know the day you came from. With knowledge that Ramarro will indeed get free and end up in the Void, I will spend the coming decades preparing. I will devise the best strategy I can."

"What can you tell us now?" Mira asked.

"Can we wait until after the ceremony?" Kendo said. "A former student of mine is involved. Then I can take you to a secluded location where we can speak freely."

"How long until it starts?" Jace asked.

"Less than an hour," Kendo said.

"Can't we just skip ahead?" Jace asked. "You time travel, right?"

Kendo smiled broadly. "It would be convenient. But traveling forward through time is nearly impossible. Particularly if you wish to return." Suddenly he looked shocked. "Oh no."

Cole turned his head, half expecting to see a terrible accident.

"What?" Mira asked.

"The Perennial Serpent is attacking Charlotte Lamb," Kendo said. A wayport opened nearby.

"Who?" Jace asked.

"A former Grand Shaper," Violet said.

"I have warning systems in place," Kendo said. "An alarm just went off. I must go now. I refuse to lose another." He paused, almost spoke, and halted again. "I could use help. Follow if you dare."

Kendo Rattan stepped into the wayport and was gone.

## CHAPTER

# 18

## SERPENT

**D**o we go?" Cole asked.

"And confront the Perennial Serpent?" Violet asked in horror.

"He can handle it, right?" Twitch asked.

"Kendo Rattan lived to tell Lorenzo he would be here today," Mira said.

"What if he lived because we helped him?" Cole asked.

"No way to know," Violet said.

"Might be good practice," Jace said. "We have worse than a snake in our future."

"Does that mean we have to jump into every fight between now and then?" Twitch asked. "If we don't go, Kendo must have survived without us."

"We don't have time to debate," Jace said.

"He's keeping the wayport open," Violet said.

"We need his help," Cole said. "Shouldn't we help him?"

Jace held out his golden strand. "Charge me up."

Cole touched the small rope and infused it with power.

"Nobody has to follow me," Jace said as he lunged through the wayport.

Staring at the shimmering disturbance, Cole drew his Jumping Sword and pushed power into it. He could still feel his connection to the golden rope.

"We're going?" Twitch asked.

"I am," Cole said.

Violet and Twitch held out their hands, and Cole connected to their powers. Suddenly Twitch had grasshopper legs. Mira presented her Jumping Sword, and Cole quickly powered it up. Then he entered the wayport.

He stepped out onto a gentle, grassy slope. Higher up, the slope leveled off, and a wooden palisade enclosed a village. Low fences divided the surrounding

fields into sections. At least a dozen cows were running in different directions—away from a giant snake.

Fangs bared, hood spread, a silver-and-white cobra reared up three or four times higher than the man and woman before it. The enormous serpent had a head the size of an anvil and a body as thick as a tree. Cole recognized Kendo as the man. Dressed as a Wayminder, the stocky woman looked well into her autumn years. A long scarf bundled her gray hair.

Jace landed to one side of the serpent, cushioning the impact with the rope. Cole had seen Jace use the rope to propel himself into battle many times. Despite the fearsome appearance of the serpent, Jace had not hesitated.

Pointing his Jumping Sword, Cole aimed for a spot in the field between Kendo and Jace and cried, “Away!” He sprang over the rippling pasture, stumbling as he landed, grass swishing against his shins.

Wielding his rope like a whip, Jace lashed the serpent in the face once, twice, three times. Seeming more annoyed than injured, the snake swiveled to face the new threat.

Mira landed beside Cole. Violet stepped through a wayport on his other side, followed by Twitch. Cole kept feeding all of them power, and his sword as well.

Jace lassoed the huge cobra’s mouth shut. The enormous serpent thrashed its head from side to side, then swept Jace’s legs out from under him with its tail. Jace lost hold of the rope, and it fell away from the serpent’s snout.

Coils writhing into a new position, the Perennial Serpent wheeled and struck at the Grand Shapers. Kendo raised both hands, and the strike slowed almost to stillness. Slender fangs gleaming, the cobra inched forward. Kendo trembled. Cole could sense a massive flood of power emanating from him as he somehow manipulated the speed of the great snake.

The slowness provided an opening.

Cole drew his Jumping Sword, pointed it just below the head of the enormous cobra, and shouted, “Away!” He sprang forward, air rushing over him as he zoomed toward his target. The sword might not have a long enough blade to whack the head clean off, but Cole figured he could deliver an ugly wound. He would plunge the blade deep and let his momentum rip it free. He would need to jump again when he landed to offset the impact. Cole squeezed the hilt tightly. If he lost hold of the sword, it would be an ugly fall.

As the tip of the Jumping Sword neared the silver-white scales, the serpent vanished. Instead of the expected impact, the sword struck nothing, and Cole

sailed through empty space, taking a smaller jump to a nearby spot after landing. Cole saw Mira stagger to a halt some distance away—she had jumped at the snake as well.

“Behind you!” Jace shouted.

Cole turned to find that the enormous serpent had materialized behind him and was rearing up, jaws agape. “Away!” Cole shouted as he jumped back toward Violet and Twitch. In his haste he leaped higher than was necessary—another jump would definitely be needed upon landing.

As Cole reached the apex of his flight, the Perennial Serpent appeared in his landing zone, head turned upward to greet him. Jace had recovered his rope, but the tail of the snake hurled him to the ground again. Cole plunged downward, and the cobra surged up to greet him.

And then Twitch collided with Cole, abruptly changing the course of his descent, insectile wings fluttering. The striking snake missed. With Twitch’s arms around him, Cole landed softly.

Twitch dove in front of Cole as the serpent struck again. Sharp fangs plunged into Twitch’s thigh, and he disappeared.

The snake tried to come at Cole again, but the golden rope encircled the base of its hood. Moving like a ribbon in a windstorm, the Perennial Serpent thrashed and corkscrewed, but the rope held, and the other end of the rope began to entangle the tail. Jace had lengthened the rope farther than Cole had seen it stretch, allowing him to attack from a greater distance away.

Despite his proximity to the dangerously flailing cobra, Cole looked around for Twitch but could not see his friend anywhere. Cole realized he could no longer feel Twitch’s power. What had happened to him? Where had the bite sent him?

Cole saw Mira pointing her Jumping Sword at the serpent and cut power to her weapon. Her mouth formed the word “away” before she took a small, unaided hop forward. He couldn’t let her risk an attack!

The snake vanished again.

Still lending power to Violet and the golden rope, Cole aimed his sword at Kendo Rattan and sprang to the Grand Shaper’s side. Cole laid a hand on the man’s wrist and felt the power blazing within him.

“Stop the snake,” Cole said, forcing a massive amount of power into Kendo.

The Perennial Serpent reappeared near Jace, ready to strike. A wayport appeared beside him, and Jace dove through to emerge behind the serpent.

Kendo raised both hands, and the serpent moved in slow motion and began to shrink. Jace lassooed the cobra just below the hood again, and Cole could see the rope digging into the scales as it squeezed.

The snake vanished.

Kendo dropped his hands to his knees, panting.

“Stay ready,” Cole said.

“It’s gone,” Kendo said. “Really gone this time.”

“Dead?” Cole asked.

“No,” Kendo replied. “But it fled through time.”

“Should we follow it?” Cole asked.

Kendo shook his head. “I can’t track it. And, mind you, I can track almost anything that moves through space or time. Not the Perennial Serpent. My oldest foe here in Creon.”

“What about Twitch?” Cole asked. “The snake bit him and he disappeared.”

Kendo regarded Cole with sad eyes. “I’m unsure. Your comrade could be no more. He could be far removed across space or time. I can’t sense what that serpent does, or really comprehend how, and believe me, I try.”

Cole squeezed the Jumping Sword hard. He wanted to throw it. He screwed one heel into the ground by pivoting it back and forth.

“I’m sorry,” Kendo said.

“What can we do?” Cole asked, trying to resist grinding his teeth.

“We can hope,” Kendo said.

“What now?” the female Wayminder asked.

“Flee to your safest stronghold,” Kendo said. “We’re no longer trapped here.”

Violet, Jace, and Mira had approached.

“The two of you were stuck here?” Violet asked.

“The fight did not begin here for Charlotte,” Kendo said. “The serpent chased her across many locations before corralling her here and blocking all escape. It shielded us from opening wayports to other destinations.”

Cole was trying to listen, trying to be interested. He had recruited Twitch for this. And now Twitch was gone. Maybe not for good. Maybe he was all right somewhere.

“I’ve never felt so helpless,” Charlotte said. “My powers utterly failed.”

“You did well lasting long enough for me to reach you,” Kendo said. “That serpent is so strong. It countered most of the actions I tried to take as well. We would have both fallen had these children not come to our aid.”

“Thank you,” Charlotte said earnestly. “I’m so sorry about your friend.”

Cole gave a nod. Mira squeezed his shoulder from behind.

“Go, Charlotte,” Kendo said. “I’ll see to the children.”

“I’m not sure I can,” Charlotte said. “I’m drained.”

Kendo glanced at Cole. “Would you mind?”

Cole tried to suppress his feelings. Currently he was needed. Mourning might have to come later. He took Charlotte’s hand. Her power was steady and strong but not nearly as dazzling as Kendo’s. He lent power to her, and a wayport opened behind her.

“Extraordinary,” Charlotte said, gazing at Cole with startled eyes. “Thank you again.”

She retreated into the wayport, and it closed.

Kendo absently waved a hand, and a new wayport opened. “Come. Let’s converse in a safer place.”

“What about Twitch?” Jace asked.

“Kendo isn’t sure what happened,” Cole said. “The serpent might have sent him far away. Or he could be gone.”

“Can’t you feel where he went?” Violet asked Kendo, then lowered her eyes. “With respect.”

“Ordinarily I could,” Kendo said. “This serpent is stealthy. It’s like nothing else I’ve ever encountered, and has been a thorn in my side practically since Creon began.”

“Does it always make people vanish?” Mira asked.

“Sometimes,” Kendo said. “We have also found corpses. Over the years the Perennial Serpent has slain two active Grand Shapers and dozens of Wayminders, along with many other citizens.”

“Were the people who vanished ever found?” Cole asked.

Kendo paused. “Not yet.”

“And lots have vanished?” Jace asked. “Some of them a long time ago?”

“The Perennial Serpent has been making people disappear with its bite for hundreds of years,” Kendo said.

Growling, Jace picked up a stone and threw it as far as he could. “I’m going to find that snake and tie it into knots!”

Mira approached Jace and hugged him. He embraced her fiercely.

Cole wiped tears from his eyes. He wanted to speak. He wanted to say maybe Twitch was alive and safe someplace far away. Or at worst he was in the



echolands. They would all get there eventually. Maybe Twitch had met up with Zig in the Hall of Glory.

No words would come.

Once again Twitch had saved him. And now Twitch was gone.

“We don’t know where Twitch went,” Mira said. “We can hope for the best.”

“Yeah,” Jace said. “It seemed like such a nice snake. It probably sent him on a fancy holiday.”

“We should adjourn to my hideaway,” Kendo said, gesturing toward the wayport.

Violet entered. Mira followed. Cole stepped through after her into a smallish room filled with walls of clear, overlapping crystals. The smooth floor and ceiling were composed of crystal as well. Trying to stare into the distance gave Cole eyestrain as prism after prism warped and fragmented the view.

Jace came through the wayport with Kendo behind him. The wayport closed.

“I feel like I’m inside a kaleidoscope,” Cole said.

“An apt description,” Kendo agreed. “Difficult for the eyes. My apologies. Hardly a pleasant room for entertaining guests. Except that it is extremely well shielded against any crooked Wayminders who might wish to visit unexpectedly or spy.”

“Have you figured out what the serpent wants?” Mira asked. “Besides killing people?”

“The Perennial Serpent is the oldest unsolved mystery in Creon,” Kendo said. “I don’t know if it wants anything. For all I know it could have no agenda. It might simply be a predator attracted to strong sources of shaping power. Sometimes it appears with a mysterious figure known as the Ancient One. The relationship between the two is not understood. The serpent has historically attacked Wayminders. Other citizens tend to perish as collateral damage. It will go decades without an appearance, then attack multiple times in a matter of months.”

“It has powers,” Cole said.

“Strong powers,” Kendo agreed. “It shapes in ways I have never seen in Creon. I believe it changes size by some form of spatial manipulation. Or maybe it incorporates elements of shaping from other kingdoms. I try to send it elsewhere, and it blocks me or comes right back.”

“It vanished when I jumped at it,” Cole said. “I didn’t see a wayport.”

“Some of what the serpent can do is beyond my understanding,” Kendo said.

“And you can’t track it?” Violet asked.

“No,” Kendo said. “I have set up methods to detect its appearance. And I have given some Wayminders procedures to contact me if it appears. But I can’t block an appearance. I can’t sense where it goes when it leaves. And I can’t tell what it does to the victims it sends away.”

“Why not?” Violet asked.

“The shaping it uses is too raw,” Kendo said. “I believe it shapes by pure instinct. And it sometimes flouts the laws we established. I’m so sorry about your friend. I wish I could do more.”

“Could it be Elegance’s power?” Violet asked. “Wouldn’t that fit?”

“It’s been around so long,” Jace said.

“In a world where time travel is possible,” Violet replied. “Made of power that allows time travel to happen.”

Everyone was silent.

“It fits,” Cole said.

“Tell me more,” Kendo urged.

Mira and Cole explained how Owandell had been schooled by Ramarro, how he had taken the shaping power from Mira and her sisters, and what it had looked like as they reclaimed the renegade shaping powers across four of the five kingdoms.

“It’s a compelling theory,” Kendo said when they finished. “I had not given serious consideration to the Perennial Serpent originating far in the future. But it now sounds plausible, perhaps even probable.”

“And we also have the problem of Ramarro,” Cole said.

Kendo sighed. “When the torivors first appeared, I knew the seeds of our destruction had been planted. I wish we could have defeated them. Instead we delayed the problem by locking them away. We left an awful catastrophe for future generations to inherit.”

“We have to beat Ramarro,” Cole said. “Just give us a way.”

“I know when you are from,” Kendo said. “Allow me twenty years. Have your friend Lorenzo send you to this same location twenty years from today. I will spend the intervening time learning what I can. Hopefully, I can give you better answers after some serious research and experimentation.”

“Okay,” Cole said.

“For you this is a brief delay,” Kendo said. “With your power to help Lorenzo, you will be talking to me again in a few minutes. Shall I send you back and get

to work? If I hurry, I can still go catch the dedication ceremony.”

“I forgot all about the ceremony,” Mira said.

“I want to support my student,” Kendo said with a sad smile. “I leave them on their own far too much. So much to do, so little time.”

“That’s funny coming from a guy who doesn’t age,” Cole said.

Kendo cocked his head. “Anything finite is over in a blink. No matter how long. Only eternity endures. Trust me—I have investigated thoroughly.”

“I have one other question,” Cole said. “Maybe it can wait.”

“What is it?” Kendo asked.

Cole braced himself. This was it—if Kendo couldn’t help him, he doubted anyone could. “I’m from Outside. I hope to get home to stay someday. And to help some of my friends do the same.”

“Yes, I see,” Kendo said. “The nature of this realm, even before we engineered it to accommodate living mortals, was to accept beings from elsewhere and prepare them to move on. It’s a place of transition. This realm separates you from your previous life, your previous world. Distances you. People are not meant to go back from here. They are supposed to journey on toward eternity.”

“So a return is impossible?” Cole asked.

“Perhaps not impossible,” Kendo said. “But extremely difficult. And contrary to the nature of this place. Among the Grand Shapers of Creon there is talk about the Pilgrim Path—a way back to our home world. By coming to the Outskirts, I gained certain powers and led an interesting life. And I cheated myself out of a truly mortal experience. The longer I live, the more I hope to finish my days with a return to regular mortality.”

There it was again, mention of the Pilgrim Path—perhaps a real possibility. Cole didn’t trust his voice but had to ask. “Then you might be able to send me home?”

“I’m not sure,” Kendo said. “It should not be possible. But many believed it would not be possible to create a place for mortals in this realm. I have defied what is possible before. Allow me more time to work on this as well.”

“It’s the best news I’ve gotten,” Cole said.

Kendo considered him. “Do you hope to flee before Ramarro gets free?”

Cole shook his head. “I have friends here. No, I just hope there is a way home after we stop him.”

Kendo placed a hand on Cole’s shoulder. “Quite a boy. I’ll work on it. For now—give Lorenzo my regards.”

A wayport opened.

## CHAPTER

# 19

## PROPOSAL

**K**endo Rattan sent you back with the pathway unshielded,” Lorenzo said after Cole, Mira, Jace, and Violet returned. “I could see where you came from. He deliberately let me know how to access the Crystal Asylum.”

“He wants us back there twenty years from our previous visit,” Violet said.

“I understand,” Lorenzo said. “But the Crystal Asylum is the stuff of legend among Wayminders. Even among Grand Shapers.”

“Ramarro is a pretty big problem,” Cole said.

“What about your friend Twitch?” Lorenzo asked.

Jace explained the fight with the Perennial Serpent. Cole struggled to keep his outward composure.

“What a strange coincidence that the serpent attacked on the very day I sent you back,” Lorenzo said. “To my knowledge, the attack was not recorded, perhaps because the Wayminders survived. I’m sorry about your friend. Like you, I hope he is well and simply far away.”

“Can I have a minute?” Cole asked. “Do you have a private place here?”

Lorenzo showed him down a hall into a small room with a cot and a writing desk. “Take your time,” the Wayminder said, closing the door.

Cole flopped onto the cot and let himself sob. Hot tears flowed.

Why had he brought Twitch into this?

Cole pressed his teeth together. Without Twitch, would *he* have vanished instead? Would he be dead? Or maybe exiled to some distant location? Would his friends be doomed without him? Was it maybe for the best that Twitch had protected him? Was that fair to think?

Cole clenched his fists and squeezed his eyes against the tears. He had to keep it together. He and his friends had to stop Ramarro.

Who was he kidding? Twitch had died. And it was probably pointless. Cole wiped away snot with the back of his hand. He was going to get himself and all his friends killed.

Would it be better to serve Ramarro? They might live. But what kind of life? A life of slavery. A life of becoming like Owandell.

Better to die fighting.

Much better.

But he wanted to live. And he wanted his friends safe.

That meant defeating Ramarro. Was it possible? He simply couldn't know yet. It didn't seem likely at the moment. Hopefully, Kendo Rattan would help them find a way.

Somebody knocked on the door.

Probably Mira.

"Come in," Cole said.

Jace entered.

"Are you all right?" Jace asked.

"Not great," Cole said.

"Twitch might be okay."

"He might be dead."

"We're probably all dead," Jace said, taking a seat beside Cole on the cot. "Ramarro is coming. Think like a Sky Raider. Realize you're probably going to die. And die bravely."

"I'm as ready as I can be," Cole said.

"I know," Jace said seriously. "I've seen. You've changed. Especially since the echolands. You're devoted to this now. You're not as worried about getting home."

"I still want to get home," Cole said.

"But not until you finish what you started here," Jace said. "Not until Ramarro is stopped. Not until the princesses are safe."

"I had a chance to go home," Cole said quietly. "In the echolands. I think it was a real chance, not just a test. And I stayed. I'm committed."

"It shows," Jace said. "But losing Twitch is different for you."

"I went and got him," Cole said. "I brought him into this."

"You gave him a chance to die well instead of cowering," Jace said. "We all have that chance. We should be grateful for it. Don't fall apart. We're all ready for the risks. We're all volunteers. If any of us fall, the rest have to keep going."

Cole nodded. "It's hard."

"Brutal," Jace said. "We have to try to win."

"Right," Cole said. "How is Mira?"

"Honestly? Kind of mad at you."

"Because of Twitch?"

"No. Because you cut power to her sword. On purpose, right?"

Cole winced. "Yeah. She was going to jump at the serpent when it was going wild."

Jace nodded. "She's not happy about it. Feels like you don't trust her. Wonders if you see her as a real part of the team. Worries you might do it again."

"Did she ask you to talk to me?" Cole asked.

"I offered," Jace said. "She complained after you left. But I could tell she didn't want to bring it up with you because of Twitch."

"I was protecting her," Cole said.

"Between you and me, I'm glad you did it," Jace said. "I'll deny those words if you tell her."

"I hear you," Cole said. "Maybe I should have let her jump. Maybe she would have killed it."

"Do you believe that?"

"Not really. I'll talk to her."

"Should we get going? See what Kendo figured out?"

"What if he has nothing?"

"Only one way to find out."

Jace stood. Cole held out a hand, and Jace hauled him to his feet.

The others waited in the main room. Lorenzo was speaking with Violet.

Cole approached Mira. "Sorry for cutting power to your sword."

"Don't try to tell me it was an accident."

"It wasn't," Cole said. "I was trying to protect you."

"I've used Jumping Swords longer than you," Mira reminded him.

"You gave me my first one," Cole said.

"I know you meant well," Mira said. "Please trust me to take care of myself. Let me be part of the team. I need to know you won't strand me in the middle of a fight."

"I'll do my best," Cole said. "I have to do what I think is right. I promise not to do anything like that again unless I have an amazing reason."

“Is that as good as I’m getting?” Mira asked.

“I could lie,” Cole said.

“Sorry about Twitch,” Mira said.

“Let’s hope he’s all right,” Cole said. “Might as well.”

“He could outlive all of us,” Jace said. “He might be in some forgotten corner of the Outskirts when the world ends.”

“It won’t end,” Mira said. “We’ll stop it.”

“Should we go meet Kendo again?” Cole asked.

“I sure hope he has some good news,” Mira said.

Cole crossed to Lorenzo. “We’re ready. Can you send us?”

“No problem, if you lend me the power. I’ll send you back to twenty years after you first met Master Rattan.”

Cole took his hand.

A waypoint opened.

“Ten hours, if you need it,” Lorenzo said. “Otherwise, Kendo Rattan can send you back earlier.”

Cole stepped through into the Crystal Asylum. Kendo awaited him, looking much the same, except for different clothes and slightly longer, messier hair. Jace, Violet, and Mira came through behind him. The waypoint was not visible on this end, and so they seemed to simply appear.

“Right on schedule,” Kendo said. “A quick twenty years for you four, I imagine?”

“Minutes, not hours,” Mira said.

“I have refreshments this time,” Kendo said, gesturing at a crystal table with five chairs. “I had more time to prepare. Least I can do, seeing as you’re trying to save the world against horrible odds. Some quiche. Pies, mostly. Savory on the left, sweet on the right.”

“Can we stop Ramarro?” Cole asked.

“I have thoughts on the matter,” Kendo said. “More than last time. You realize you caught me off guard. We’ll talk as we eat. Come sit.”

They gathered around the table. Cole sat beside Violet, across from Jace and Mira. Kendo claimed a seat at the end of the table. He began pointing at various pies with a fork.

“Sausage, beef, lamb, and turkey,” he said. “I like the white quiche more than the yellow. And for dessert, peach, apple, or berry.”

“Looks good,” Jace said, helping himself to a slice of sausage pie. Cole saw



cheese in it and bits of vegetables. He went for the beef. It had a layer of mashed potatoes at the base.

“I have only one plan,” Kendo said as the kids started eating. A piece of lamb pie sat before him. He spooned mint jelly onto it.

“What is it?” Cole asked.

“It combines the two issues you asked about,” Kendo said. “I have come up with no way to strengthen the Void. It will hold as long as it will hold. Probably not very long. I can think of no way to entrap Ramarro once he gets free. And I have no idea how to defeat him.”

“Not great so far,” Jace said.

“Let me share the plan,” Kendo said. “I have explored the feasibility of the Pilgrim Path—a way to go permanently from the Outskirts to Earth. I believe it is possible. I also suspect that if we could lure Ramarro down the Pilgrim Path, we might be able to solve our dilemma.”

“What about Earth?” Cole asked.

“There is a chance Ramarro would be powerless on Earth,” Kendo said. “And . . . it is possible he would take over your world and rule unchallenged until the end of time.”

“We can’t let that happen,” Cole said, no longer interested in his food.

“Agreed,” Kendo said. “And so I must research exactly which alternative would play out.”

“Haven’t you done that already?” Jace asked.

“As much as I can for now,” Kendo said. “The Pilgrim Path remains a theoretical option. I can’t be sure it will work until I walk it. And once I walk it, I cannot return.”

“So you’re waiting,” Violet said.

“Yes,” Kendo said. “I may have to wait a good while. Walking the Pilgrim Path will strip me of all connection to the Outskirts. I would permanently lose my powers.”

“Does that mean Ramarro would lose his powers if he walks the path?” Mira asked.

“I think so,” Kendo said. “He would certainly lose his connection to the Outskirts. But torivors are from Outside as well. I’m not sure how his native powers would manifest in Cole’s world. I believe Earth would be inherently hostile to his source of power. But I’m not certain.”

“We can’t send Ramarro to Earth unless we know he won’t destroy the

planet,” Cole said.

“Agreed,” Kendo replied.

“Do you think the Pilgrim Path will work?” Violet asked.

“I strongly believe so,” Kendo said. “But I’m not completely certain. Nor am I sure what walking the path will do to me. My shaping powers are so much a part of me, I don’t know who exactly I will be after I lose them.”

“You’ll age again,” Mira said.

“Yes,” Kendo said. “Possibly all at once. I might walk the Pilgrim Path and immediately turn to dust! Though I suspect I will simply return to the normal process of aging.”

“How do we find out more?” Cole asked, working on his pie again.

“I have a plan,” Kendo said. “Part of me has wanted to attempt the Pilgrim Path for a good while. No man is meant to live forever. At least not as a mortal. And I have borne the burden of protecting the Outskirts for so long. I don’t want to bear it eternally. And now I know the day. You children have given me a reason. I can walk away from the Outskirts and protect it at the same time.”

“I don’t follow,” Jace said.

“Hundreds of years from now, ten years before you meet Lorenzo Debray, I will walk the Pilgrim Path. That will allow me to confirm that the path can be walked, and give me time to study the safety of bringing Ramarro to Earth.”

“And we will be able to visit you there,” Violet said.

“I will continue to research the matter and examine all contingencies. When you return to Lorenzo, he will have information about how to contact me on Earth. And he will send you there to find me.”

“Then he already knew you were there when he met us,” Cole said.

“Correct, assuming I follow through on this plan. If I do not, he will have other instructions. When you return to Lorenzo, simply tell him I gave you permission to see inside the green box.”

“That green box?” Violet asked, pointing to a container roughly the size of a shoe box beside the dessert pies.

“If you have no objection to the container,” Kendo said. “I rather like it. I will be preparing for hundreds of years. And you will know my fate in a matter of hours.”

“Does this mean I could walk the Pilgrim Path one day?” Cole asked. “And could my friends who were taken?”

“I will leave detailed instructions behind,” Kendo said. “If I succeed, yes, it

means you could probably walk the Path as well. At the same cost of course. You would lose your shaping abilities, and become so out of tune with the Outskirts that you could never return.”

“What about the echolands?” Cole asked. “After I die?”

“I can’t speak to those matters,” Kendo said. “What happens after you die is an issue for the Grand Shapers of Necronum. Or, you know, wait and see. I rather enjoy a good surprise.”

“There is no other way to fight Ramarro?” Jace asked.

“Not that I can currently imagine,” Kendo said. “Not that leaves you a chance to win. I’ll keep pondering the matter. If things become sufficiently dire, you could always consult the other torivor.”

“Trillian,” Cole said. “I’ve met him.”

“And here you stand,” Kendo said. “Without his taint upon you. Impressive.”

“Talking to Trillian would almost certainly make matters worse,” Mira said.

“I agree in principle,” Kendo said. “Neither torivor can be trusted. Either would gladly take over the five kingdoms. And yet if defeat ever becomes certain, any chance is better than none.”

“It’s something to remember,” Cole said.

“Dessert,” Jace said, reaching for a slice of peach pie.

“So that’s it,” Cole said. “We go back to Lorenzo and see what’s in the box.”

“If I come up with new ideas between now and then, I’ll adjust,” Kendo said. “Otherwise, expect information about how to find me. Hopefully, I will have the answers you need. For now, enjoy the meal.”

Cole could not keep his thoughts from straying to Dalton, Hunter, and Jenna as he ate. And the other kids from his world. They would freak out when they heard there was a chance they could truly go home! It had seemed impossible for so long.

If only Cole could live long enough to see them again.

Cole almost didn’t dare to hope for success. Though perhaps possible, it remained so distant. And hoping for unlikely but desperately desired outcomes was a fast road to disappointment and pain.

One step at a time.

One victory at a time.

He tried a little of each dessert pie and liked berry the best.

It seemed Jace had about two slices of everything.

“How do you eat so much?” Violet asked him.

“I think the secret is spending most of your life as an underprivileged slave,” Jace said. “It also helps when you’re pretty sure the world is about to end. And if you don’t mind eating until it hurts.”

“If you’re done, I can send you back to Lorenzo,” Kendo said.

Cole looked around the table. The others seemed in agreement.

“Sure,” Mira said.

A wayport opened.

“I look forward to our next meeting,” Kendo said. “One way or another.”

## CHAPTER

# 20

## OUTSIDE

**K**endo gave us permission to see inside the green box,” Cole reported once they were back inside Lorenzo’s subterranean lair.

“I knew it!” Lorenzo exclaimed.

“Did you know about us all along?” Mira asked. “And about the box?”

“I very strongly suspected,” Lorenzo said. “But I was under strict instructions not to show the box unless you asked.”

“How much did you know?” Cole asked.

“I knew about you, Cole, and your power,” Lorenzo said. “I knew Mira was a princess. I had heard about Jace and Violet. Kendo Rattan did not want me involving the wrong people. Cole, the extent of your ability still surprised me.”

“Have you looked into the box?” Mira asked.

“Never!” Lorenzo said. “I’ve waited for this day for the last ten years. That was when Kendo confirmed to me that the Pilgrim Path was more than just a fable and left the green box in my care. Then he departed this world.”

“Do you know if he survived?” Mira asked.

“He survived,” Lorenzo said. “I visited him right after he went. It was a success.”

“Did Kendo tell you about the dedication of the Halbhook School so we would find him?” Cole asked.

“Perhaps,” Lorenzo said.

“How does that work?” Cole asked. “How could he know to tell you? The first time the dedication happened we wouldn’t have been there.”

“Remember,” Lorenzo said. “Once you go back in time, you were always there. And if you were there, Kendo could have planted seeds to help it happen.”

“I don’t get it,” Cole said.

“You think of cause and effect as linear,” Lorenzo said. “You think one has to precede the other. That breaks down when you can move across time. It’s hard to think four dimensionally when we typically live in three. Even the best time jumpers only operate as guests in four dimensions.”

“The box?” Mira prompted.

“This way,” Lorenzo said. A wayport opened. He motioned for them to enter.

Cole went through after Jace and emerged in another large underground rectangular room that looked a lot like the one they had left. Violet and Mira came through, followed by Lorenzo.

“Is this really a different place?” Jace asked suspiciously.

“It’s a long way from my other hideout,” Lorenzo said. “I’m not much of an artist. I’ve used the same plan for several hideaways. I almost never come here. It’s where I keep the box.” He led them to a table. Cole recognized the box awaiting them.

Lorenzo inserted a key and lifted the lid. He removed a piece of lined paper and handed it to Cole.

“This looks like it’s from my world,” Cole said.

“I’m sure it is,” Lorenzo said. “Kendo visited Earth many times before walking the Pilgrim Path. He left the box shortly before he departed the five kingdoms for good.”

Cole looked at the note.

*Dear Cole, Mira, Jace, and Violet,*

*I trust you are well. If all goes according to plan, when you read this, we will have recently spoken, though from my point of view it has been a very long time since our last conversation. I will have walked the Pilgrim Path ten years ago. Hopefully, Lorenzo was able to confirm that I arrived to Earth safely. If not, I apologize and encourage you to plan alternate strategies with him.*

*Come see me, and I will tell you all I can about how we might lure Ramarro to Earth, and whether it would be ethical to try. You will find me in the Miami area. South Beach. A condo high-rise called the Pinnacle on Playa Circle. I’m number 1421. Hit the button. I’ll be waiting. See you soon.*

*By the way, I have encountered the Perennial Serpent a few more times and feel it could indeed be an embodiment of stolen shaping power. I hoped to defeat it for you, but never succeeded.*

*See you shortly,  
Kendo Rattan*

“I’ve never been to Miami,” Cole said.

“It’s pleasant,” Lorenzo replied.

“You’ve been?” Cole exclaimed.

“I’ve visited many places,” Lorenzo said. “Miami had delicious stone crab. And wonderful Cuban sandwiches. I can get you near the Pinnacle. You’ll have two hours maximum. But I can send you again if needed.”

“Our shaping won’t work there,” Mira said.

“None of it,” Lorenzo agreed. “Your powers will be entirely dormant. So be careful.” He took out a roll of twenty-dollar bills and handed it to Cole. “Some money . . . just in case.”

Cole thumbed through the bills. It was surreal to look at regular money after so long—something that had once felt so valuable and now seemed incredibly small compared to everything else at stake here. Still, his old self would have freaked out to have this much cash in his hands. “This is a lot!” he exclaimed.

Lorenzo shrugged. “Don’t be conspicuous about it. You’ll have it if you need it.” He held out a hand. “Do you mind giving me a little help?”

Cole took his hand and energized his power.

A wayport opened.

It was too bright to stare at directly.

“Are you sure this doesn’t lead to the sun?” Cole asked.

“Openings to the Outside tend to be brilliant,” Violet said.

“And a little more disorienting,” Lorenzo said. “Try to relax. You’ll arrive just fine.”

“We can go?” Mira asked. “Already?”

“Thanks to my limitless energy source,” Lorenzo said, giving Cole a pat on the shoulder.

“I like the hustle,” Cole said. “We have no time to waste. I can’t believe I’ll be back in my world. Even for a little while.”

“Me first,” Jace said, stepping into the radiant portal.

Cole followed.

When Cole stepped inside, bright whiteness blinded him entirely. His foot did not reach the ground. Instead he floated forward. Or down? He seemed to

move and hold still at the same time. Cracking his eyes against the glaring light, Cole could see no details.

He began to feel nauseated.

And then his feet were on dirt, and he could open his eyes just fine. Cole stood beside Jace in a corner where concrete walls intersected. Succulents and shrubs grew all around him, screening him from view. Mira appeared, and then Violet.

Cole led the others out of the patch of vegetation and into a parking lot. Towering white clouds floated in an otherwise blue sky. Art deco buildings crowded an avenue. A row of palm trees stretched high and slender with shaggy tops. Not far away, a white-sand beach spread out with the ocean beyond. Lots of foot traffic moved along a walkway paralleling the beach—a blend of people in touristy attire, scantily clad beachgoers, slackers, and fitness enthusiasts.

“If you get thirsty around here, just breathe,” Jace said.

“Hot and humid,” Cole agreed. “But look at that beach.”

“People in your world don’t wear very much when they swim,” Jace observed.

“I guess not,” Cole had to agree.

“The buildings are huge,” Violet said, looking around.

“This is nothing,” Cole said. “They get bigger. Like Zeropolis.”

“Want to go for a quick swim?” Jace asked, eyes on the water.

“Kind of,” Cole said. “Aren’t we racing the end of the world?”

“Exactly,” Jace said. “What if this is our only chance?”

“Maybe after we talk to Kendo,” Mira said. “There may be time.”

Cole noticed a street sign. “Playa Circle is right over there. It looks tiny.” He pointed to a white building taller than some of the others. “I bet that’s the Pinnacle.”

“Let’s find out,” Mira said.

They hurried over to Playa Circle and turned up the little street. An awning over the front doors proclaimed the suspected building the Pinnacle. Cole opened the front doors into a small room with columns of buttons beside four-digit numbers on the wall. The air was markedly cooler. Jace tried the next door but found it locked.

“I think we can call him from here,” Cole said. He had seen such devices in movies but had never used one.

“Fourteen twenty-one,” Violet reminded them.

Cole found the number and pressed the button. They waited a moment.



“Hello?” asked a male voice, recognizably Kendo.

“Hi, Kendo,” Cole said. “We’re here.”

A pause followed. “Excuse me?”

“It’s Cole, Mira, Jace, and Violet,” Cole said. “We’re here for our meeting.”

Another pause. “I’m not sure what you mean. I’m not expecting anyone. There is no soliciting allowed here, young man.”

“You’re Kendo Rattan, right?”

“That is not . . . what I go by,” the man said. “Who are you? Why are you contacting me?”

“You told us to come here,” Cole said. “We’re from the Outskirts. The five kingdoms. You set up this meeting a long time ago.”

A long pause followed. Cole wondered if Kendo had hung up. “Who put you up to this?” the man asked.

“You did,” Cole said. “We really need your help.”

Violet leaned forward. “Have you forgotten?” she asked.

“There are four of you?” the man asked.

“And we don’t have much time,” Cole said. “We’ll be sucked back to the Outskirts before long. We need to talk about Ramarro.”

There came a buzzing sound.

“Come on up,” the man said.

Cole pulled the door open and led the way to the elevator. He pushed the button, and they waited until the doors opened. Inside, the buttons rose from L to 18, skipping 13. Cole pressed 14. The elevator started to ascend.

“This will take us up?” Jace asked. “Your world is like Zeropolis.”

The elevator stopped abruptly enough to make Cole’s stomach lurch a little. He walked down a hall until they found the door marked 1421. Cole knocked.

The door opened. Not all the way.

It was definitely Kendo Rattan. He wore a bowling shirt, shorts, and sandals. His hair looked a little grayer and thinner, his face somewhat older, but he was unmistakable.

“Do you remember us now?” Cole asked.

Kendo looked perplexed. He slowly shook his head. “You are not familiar to me.”

“None of us?” Mira asked. “You met us a couple of times over the years.”

“Have you been working on Ramarro?” Jace asked.

“Where are your parents?” Kendo asked.

“Creon,” Violet said.

“Orphan,” Jace said.

“Mine don’t remember me ever since I was kidnapped to the Outskirts,” Cole said.

“And mine were recently abducted,” Mira said. “The High King Stafford Pemberton and his consort, Harmony?”

Kendo rubbed his eyes. “I am really losing it.”

“You really don’t remember?” Cole asked.

Kendo regarded them thoughtfully. He pulled the door fully open. “Come inside.”

“Thanks,” Cole said.

The front room was nicely appointed. A sliding door led to a balcony with an ocean view. A tiny brown dog yipped at them.

“Hush, Monster,” Kendo said. “These are only figments of my imagination.” He looked at Cole. “Have a seat. Are you thirsty?”

“We’re all right,” Cole said.

“What do you have?” Jace asked.

“Water,” Kendo said. “Ginger ale. I could make some lemonade.”

“I’ll try ginger ale,” Jace said.

“Anyone else?” Kendo offered.

“Sure,” Cole said. “Lemonade.” Who knew when he would get his next chance for a taste of home?

The others shook their heads.

Kendo walked into his kitchen. Cole heard an ice machine grinding. Kendo returned with a glass for Jace and another for Cole.

“You came from the Outskirts,” Kendo said as if it were unlikely.

“Yes,” Cole assured him.

“What did I do there?” Kendo asked.

“You were a Wayminder,” Cole said.

“Not just a Wayminder,” Violet gushed. “You are Kendo Rattan! Grand Shaper of Creon. The founder of Creon! You helped make the Outskirts.”

Kendo gave a little chuckle and tapped his temple. “That I might believe. If I invented it in here. Inside my mind.”

“You really don’t remember,” Mira said.

“This is all very odd,” Kendo said. “If it is some kind of joke, please desist. You have no idea how much you could be setting me back. But I’m not sure who

would care to make this joke.”

“It isn’t a joke,” Cole promised. “It’s the opposite, actually. Desperately real. Life and death.”

Kendo rubbed his elbow uncomfortably. “I have . . . journals.”

“Yeah?” Cole asked.

“My handwriting. They tell of another place. Another me. An impossible place. An impossible me.”

“Creon,” Violet said.

“The Outskirts,” Jace added.

“You know the names,” Kendo said. “How do you know those words?”

“We just came from there,” Cole said.

Kendo gave an awkward chuckle. “You can’t imagine how absurd this sounds. And how confusing it is.”

“Why?” Mira asked.

He gazed at her. “I don’t remember my life. My memory goes back eight, nine years. Nothing before then. Only scribblings in journals about preposterous places and incredible dilemmas. As if I wrote an elaborate fiction and became lost in it. As if I broke my mind.”

“Why don’t you go by your real name?” Cole asked.

“The journals warn me not to use the name Kendo Rattan,” Kendo said. “I go by Andy Starnes. Andy Starnes has no history before ten years ago. Neither does Kendo Rattan. No birth certificate.”

“Don’t you have ID?” Cole asked.

“I have papers,” Kendo said. “Andrew Starnes. American citizen. I have a Social Security number. I have a birth certificate. But I did the research. They’re fake. Good fakes, but fake.”

“How did you get them?” Cole asked.

“I don’t remember,” Kendo said. “It happened during a hazy period about nine years ago that contains my first flickers of recall. No clear memories. My journal tells me I converted gold to dollars and used it to buy this apartment and a false identity. My journal makes all sorts of wild claims. I have long suspected that I am neither Kendo Rattan nor Andrew Starnes, but rather someone else who lost his sanity. Maybe I had an accident. Maybe it was drugs. I made up a story land called the Outskirts, where I lived. An elaborate farce. Somewhere along the way my true identity perished.”

“You’re Kendo Rattan,” Mira said.

Kendo winced. “Perhaps. Can you imagine how painful that is to hear? I have . . . tattered scraps of the Outskirts in my mind. Like a half-forgotten dream full of gaps and inconsistencies. I can hardly distinguish between what I actually remember and what I read in my journals. My writings are disturbingly coherent. Especially at first. I seemed utterly convinced of this fanciful reality.”

“You came here ten years ago,” Cole said. “You called it the Pilgrim Path. You knew you would lose your powers. Apparently you also lost your memory.”

“I don’t remember parents, siblings—any family,” Kendo said. “I don’t know if I had wives or girlfriends. Children. I don’t know if I held a job. I just have words in a book that sound insane. Preposterous. Imaginary.”

“Those words are true,” Cole said. “And important. In less than two hours, we’re going to get drawn back into the Outskirts. You can watch us disappear. Would that help?”

Kendo regarded him in silence. “It would be a comfort to see something concrete. It would also be . . . so distressing. I thought I had this figured out. I thought I had it behind me. If this is some sort of con job, you are unspeakably cruel.”

“We’re not tricking you,” Mira assured him.

“It would seem not,” Kendo said.

“You came here to do research about Ramarro,” Cole said. “To see what would happen to him if he came here.”

“The torivor,” Kendo said. “I wrote a lot about him. I was evidently obsessed with the topic. He is dangerous?”

“He’s going to destroy the Outskirts if we can’t stop him,” Cole said.

Kendo nodded. “Wait one moment. Let me fetch my journals.” He walked out of the room.

“This is terrible,” Jace whispered. “What do we do?”

“We hope he wrote something useful before he forgot what he was doing,” Mira said. “Be patient. Part of him wants to believe us.”

Kendo returned with a stack of identical hardback journals. He set them on the coffee table and started thumbing through one of them. Cole and the others watched.

“It has been some time since I studied these,” Kendo said. “I used to read them frequently. I didn’t believe what I had written, but I hoped to find clues about what happened to my mind, what happened to my past.” He smoothed his hand over a page. “In these journals, I gave myself instructions. I apparently

became aware my memory was failing and shared advice and warnings. It all pertained to an imaginary world.” He snapped the book closed. “It has to be imaginary.”

“It’s not imaginary,” Mira said. “Just hard to believe from your current vantage point.”

“Do you know how crazy that sounds?” Kendo asked. “How can I possibly believe you?”

“Then where did we come from?” Cole asked. “How do we know what you know?”

“You broke in and read my journals,” Kendo said. “Or somebody did. What is more likely? I come from a magical world where I was an important leader? Or I had a mental breakdown, and somebody is now using my journals to exploit me? What do you really want? Money?”

“We want to know how to stop Ramarro,” Cole said. “We want to know if it would be safe to lure him here. And we want to know if I can ever get back to Earth with my friends.”

“You’re from Earth?” Kendo asked.

“Originally,” Cole said. “These other kids were born in the Outskirts. But I’m from Arizona. My friends were kidnapped by slavers and taken to the Outskirts. I followed them there, but we can’t get home permanently. At least not without your help.”

“Yet here you are in the real world,” Kendo said. “Asking for nonsensical information about a nonsensical world.”

“We need the vital information you recorded before you forgot who you are,” Mira said.

“You don’t want money?” Kendo said. “You don’t want favors? No secrets about my actual past to taunt me with? No blackmail? Come on—don’t waste my time. What’s the catch?”

“Just info,” Cole said. “So we can try to save an entire world.”

Kendo folded his arms. “It has been a long time since I looked hard at this stuff. I rambled on and on. But I seem to remember . . .” He picked up a journal and started leafing through it.

Cole watched in silence. So did the others.

Kendo read for a moment. Then paged ahead. Then read again.

“Your names?” Kendo asked.

Cole repeated their names.

Kendo nodded. "It says you would come."

"You told us to come," Cole said. "We're here because of you."

"You're right on schedule," Kendo said. "To the day. I used to wonder if anyone would actually show up. Then I forgot to wonder."

"Here we are," Mira said.

"I left myself a message for you," Kendo said. "If it helps . . . great."

"Let's have it," Cole said.

Kendo started to read. "I am utterly powerless, and my memory is failing. I could not ascertain what it would look like if torivors reached Earth. I suspect they would be rendered powerless. Perhaps even more powerless than me. Coming here might destroy them. But I have no way to confirm. Please tell Lorenzo to share the location of the Void. And to give you access to the three talismans. It is now the best help I can offer, unless you can find a way to confirm what I could not about the torivors."

"You forgot we were coming?" Mira asked.

"I've wanted to forget all of this," Kendo said. "I've mostly succeeded. Talking to you stirred up memories of some things I read."

"Is there more?" Violet asked.

"That was the message," Kendo said. He read it again. "So much in these journals describes how I set up my life here. A lot deals with failed experiments regarding these torivors. I go on and on like a madman. After my message to you, I kept journaling, but my memory was clearly getting worse. Before long I was mostly musing about whether my journal was fact or fiction. By the end I concluded it was fiction. Not long afterward I stopped writing."

"You did your best," Mira said. "It must have been hard."

Kendo looked like he was having difficulty composing himself. "I'm not sure how difficult it was. I lead a comfortable life. Only the words in these journals trouble me. And the huge gap in my memory. I have considered destroying the journals. I expect I would eventually forget them as I have forgotten the rest. Then all I would have is the void in my memory."

"Why haven't you done it?" Cole asked.

Kendo scrunched his face. "I worry that even an insane explanation might be better than none. It's hard not remembering if you have anyone. Not remembering a life or a career. Then again, it's strange reading about yourself being some kind of teleportation wizard in an improbable fairy tale. And it's

challenging to meet kids who seem sincere as they seek to confirm your delusions.”

“Not delusions,” Cole said. “It would be crazy if it never happened. But it happened.”

“You gave up a lot,” Mira said. “You were so powerful. You could have lived forever.”

“Probably not after the torivor got loose,” Jace said.

Mira nodded. “Maybe not after that. Do you know about the talismans you mentioned?”

Kendo shook his head. “I allude to them elsewhere. But I never describe them. I assume Lorenzo knows. If he exists.”

“Maybe there is hope,” Violet said. “Maybe Kendo made another plan before he lost his memory.”

“He obviously had some idea,” Cole said. “Talismans sound better than nothing.”

“Maybe we can still work with Lorenzo to find a way to confirm what will happen to a torivor who comes to Earth,” Mira said.

“We can’t endanger Earth,” Cole said. “We can only try to lure Ramarro here if we’re completely sure.”

“It is so odd to hear you discuss these matters as if they are real,” Kendo said.

“I’m sorry you can’t remember who you were,” Violet said. “You were amazing.”

Kendo took a shuddering breath. “This is overwhelming. You claim that you will eventually disappear before my eyes?”

“Those who stay here,” Jace said, standing up. “I’m going to the beach. Who wants to join me?”

CHAPTER  
— 21 —

TALISMANS

Cole stood with the salt water to his chin. As a swell came in, his feet left the ground, and he had to tread water to stay above the surface. Off to one side and a bit closer to the shore, Jace tried to catch the wave as it broke around him. What he lacked in skill at bodysurfing, he made up for with persistence.

While Cole kicked with his feet and swept one hand back and forth, he hoisted up the swim trunks borrowed from Kendo. Even with the drawstring pulled as tight as he could tie it, the bathing suit barely stayed on.

Jace turned around after surging shoreward ten or fifteen feet and waded back toward Cole, clutching his own ill-fitting borrowed trunks. Cole let some briny water past his lips and spit it out, finding it too salty to even use as mouthwash.

The sunlight dimmed. The water began to darken. All sound became more remote and developed a slight echo.

As the water receded, Cole's feet reached the sandy bottom again. He pivoted toward the beach. The water became black, and color bled away from the shore as the day faded to a starless night. The squeal of a young girl reached him slowly, as if through a thick medium and from a great distance.

Cole could feel his power again. No longer in water, he drifted in darkness, nausea curdling in his gut, until his feet touched the ground.

He was back in Lorenzo's underground chamber beside Jace, Mira, and Violet. The Grand Shaper watched them expectantly.

Cole's borrowed swim trunks were gone.

He was no longer wet.

His clothes were back on him.

Jace's were too.



Cole had left his clothes at Kendo's condo along with the two girls. Mira and Violet had decided to remain with Kendo until they were drawn back to the Outskirts so the old man could witness their disappearance.

"Kendo lost his memory," Mira said.

Lorenzo looked disappointed. "How much?"

"All of it," Cole said. "At least about the Outskirts. He forgot over time. He kept journals but stopped believing them. He shared his writings with us."

"Did any key information survive?" Lorenzo asked.

"Kendo could never confirm whether torivors would have powers on Earth," Mira said. "He thinks they wouldn't, and hopes we can research the question more."

Lorenzo sighed. "He should know that is virtually impossible to do from here. It's a big part of why he walked the Pilgrim Path in the first place. I'll do what I can. Anything else?"

"We're supposed to ask for the location of the Void," Cole said. "I guess you know? And we're supposed to ask for the three talismans."

Lorenzo's expression became grave. He solemnly closed his eyes. "The hour has come."

"What hour?" Violet asked.

Lorenzo opened his eyes. "Centuries ago, the ten most powerful Grand Shapers of Creon united to produce three talismans. Each yields an effect that none of us have learned to replicate on our own. Kendo told me of them before he walked the Pilgrim Path, at the same time when he confided where the Void is hidden. Those talismans were only meant to be used in the event of a crisis that threatened the survival of the Outskirts. Evidently the day has arrived."

"Right," Jace said. "We're all in enormous trouble. It's what we've been trying to tell you."

"What do they do?" Cole asked. "Can they save us?"

"Time will tell," Lorenzo said. "We need to travel elsewhere."

A wayport opened.

"How come I have my clothes back?" Jace asked.

"Pardon me?" Lorenzo asked.

"I was swimming in the ocean," Jace said. "I had left my clothes at Kendo's."

"Your clothes were drawn back to the Outskirts just as you were," Lorenzo said. "They exited as they entered—with you wearing them. It's extremely difficult to move anything from the Outskirts to Earth and keep it there. The

Pilgrim Path is the only way we have discovered. Come.” He gestured at the wayport.

Cole’s stomach had begun to settle. He stepped through the wayport into a room with walls of polished steel. The action made his fading nausea no worse. A round vault door faced him, complete with a keypad and some kind of touch screen. The ceiling and floor were made of glossy steel as well.

The others came through the wayport with Lorenzo bringing up the rear.

“Is that the Void?” Jace asked.

“This is a more ordinary vault,” Lorenzo said. “Carefully hidden and shielded by me. This vault comes from Outside.” He walked up to the keypad, typed a code, then placed his hand on the touch screen. The background of the screen went from red to green, and a chime sounded.

Lorenzo spun a wheel and hauled the vault door open. It had to be at least two feet thick. Easily bulletproof. Maybe missile-proof too? Lorenzo led the way into a smaller room, again made entirely of steel. This room had drawers in the walls and a burnished metal table in the center.

Lorenzo opened a drawer and removed a flask. From a different drawer came a second flask. Another drawer yielded a third. He set them on the table and sat down.

Cole and his friends sat as well.

“Drinkable talismans?” Cole guessed.

“These three potions are infused with unique shaping capabilities,” Lorenzo said. He tapped one. “This will send a single person one hundred years into the future. There is no known way back. It is the least useful for our purposes, unless one of us wants to use it to escape as a last resort.”

“If Ramarro gets free, won’t he still be running the Outskirts in a hundred years?” Jace asked.

“I imagine so,” Lorenzo said. “Unless he grows tired of the experience and moves on to another realm. The only way to know for sure would be to try the potion.”

“What do the others do?” Cole asked.

Lorenzo hefted a different flask. “This one can restore youth through time manipulation. Grand Shapers and other advanced Wayminders have learned to use time shifting to slow the aging process. The best of us can essentially halt the process. But none of us have managed to reverse the inevitable. Except with this potion.”

“How do you know it works?” Mira asked.

“Kendo is confident,” Lorenzo said. “His endorsement is good enough for me. In essence, the potion sends your anatomy back in time while simultaneously keeping you in the present. You get to have the body of yesteryear today. The effect would be destroyed if the subject departed Creon. Otherwise, an elderly citizen of Creon could inherit a second lifetime.”

“How young does it make the subject?” Violet asked.

“Around twenty,” Lorenzo said.

“Do you have somebody in mind to use it?” Mira asked.

“Nobody in particular,” Lorenzo said. “We want someone who could be useful stopping Ramarro.”

“I have an elegant idea,” Mira said.

Cole immediately thought of the old swordsman sitting in a wheelchair inside the Iron Fort. He met eyes with Mira and nodded.

“And the third one?” Jace asked.

Lorenzo handled the final flask. “The third is the most powerful and potentially the most instructive. Whoever drinks it will gain the opportunity to explore a probable future.”

“What does that mean?” Cole asked.

“The potion will fix the subject to the point in the timestream when he or she drinks it,” Lorenzo said. “For the next three days, whoever drinks the potion will seem to move forward in time. It will feel like normal life. But nothing that happens will endure. At the end of three days, the subject will return to the point when he or she drank the potion and proceed forward through time like normal.”

“It’s like visiting the future,” Jace said.

“As near as has ever been managed,” Lorenzo said.

“That’s not possible,” Violet whispered.

“Going into the future and returning is not possible,” Lorenzo said. “The subject does not go into the actual future. The subject visits a highly probable future. A possibility. The rest of us seem to be there, but we’re really not. None of it is actually happening. To be candid, it sounds unlikely to me as well, and I do not understand how it is accomplished, but Kendo Rattan assured me that it will work as promised.”

“What if the person gets killed?” Cole asked.

“I asked the same question,” Lorenzo said. “If the subject gets killed, he or she

will return to the moment when he or she drank the potion and miss the rest of the three days.”

“And if you leave Creon?” Mira asked.

“If the subject leaves Creon, he or she will return to the moment when he or she drank the potion.”

“Otherwise, we get a peek at the future,” Jace said.

“A probable future,” Violet corrected.

“What if we stop Ramarro?” Cole asked.

“At the end of three days, whoever drank the potion will return to the moment when he or she drank the potion,” Lorenzo said. “All that seemed to have happened will not have happened yet. Because it was not the actual future. But the subject could then try to replicate what occurred.”

“How accurate is the possible future?” Jace asked.

“It’s untested,” Lorenzo replied. “But it should be extremely accurate.”

“We need to wait until the Void is almost open,” Cole said. “This will give us an extra chance at figuring out how to stop Ramarro.”

“I believe that is what Kendo Rattan intended,” Lorenzo said.

“Is there a way to tell when the Void will open?” Cole asked.

“That moment is roughly one day away,” Lorenzo said. “Two at best.”

The kids all stared at him in stunned silence.

“A day away?” Mira asked.

“How do you know?” Violet wondered.

“When Kendo learned the Void would house Ramarro, he made a few modifications,” Lorenzo said. “He included an early warning system that would alert us when Ramarro learned the skills necessary to break down the defenses.”

“The alarm went off?” Jace asked.

Lorenzo nodded. “While you were back in time.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jace exclaimed.

“You’ve been busy ever since,” Lorenzo said. “You needed to visit Kendo before we proceeded.”

“So we have a day,” Cole said.

“Maybe less,” Lorenzo said. “Perhaps a little more.”

“Do you know where we can find the Void?” Mira asked.

Lorenzo took a pendant from around his neck. A tarnished sphere dangled at the end of the chain. “This is it.”

“Ramarro seemed bigger in the echolands,” Jace deadpanned.

“Don’t forget that you are in Creon,” Lorenzo said. “Space can be manipulated. Enormous areas can be fit into modest confines.”

“Ramarro is really in there?” Mira asked.

“The entire vastness of the Void is in here,” Lorenzo said. “With Ramarro trapped at the center.”

“We shrank him?” Cole asked.

“In a sense,” Lorenzo said, flicking the sphere at the end of the pendant. “The Void truly is enormous. If it helps, think of the pendant as the wayport to the Void. The conduit to the Void.”

“What if we destroy the pendant?” Cole asked. “Would we break the connection to the Void? Trap him better?”

Lorenzo shook his head. “I wish it could be that simple. Destroying this little sphere would unravel the Void, freeing Ramarro instead of trapping him.” He flicked it again.

“Should you maybe not flick it?” Jace asked uncomfortably.

“It’s exceedingly durable,” Lorenzo said. “I doubt the sphere could be damaged except with mighty shaping.”

“Keep it away from Cole,” Jace muttered.

“Kendo mentioned that could be a wise precaution,” Lorenzo said.

“If we’re running out of time, shouldn’t we use the potion soon?” Violet asked. “The one that shows the probable future?”

“As soon as possible,” Lorenzo said. “Already, whoever ingests it will probably not get to experience the full three days. Unless we defeat Ramarro.”

“Who should take it?” Mira asked Lorenzo. “You?”

“Before he left Creon, Kendo nominated Cole,” Lorenzo said.

“Why me?” Cole asked.

“Kendo believes your power represents our best hope of stopping Ramarro,” Lorenzo said.

“Won’t I be in the probable future no matter who goes?” Cole asked.

“Only the person who drinks the potion will remember what happened,” Lorenzo said. “To everyone else in the world, the possible future revealed by the potion will have never existed. Kendo wants you to have practice against the torivor. He wants you to remember what works and what doesn’t. He wants you to have actual experience facing him.”

“Makes sense,” Jace said.

“But if you go, could you maybe come up with a way to contain him?” Cole

asked Lorenzo.

“I would try,” Lorenzo said. “Kendo does not believe I could succeed. He adamantly felt you represent our best hope.”

Cole looked at his friends. “It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Better you than anyone,” Jace said. “You stood up to Ramarro in the echolands. Now do it here.”

“What do you think, Mira?” Cole asked.

“I would have wanted you to take it even without Kendo’s endorsement,” she said.

Cole nodded. It would be nice to let somebody else carry this weight. But he was clearly needed. He looked at Lorenzo. “I’ll do my best.”

“Then we should hurry,” Lorenzo said. “Time keeps passing.” He unstopped the flask and handed it to Cole.

“I just drink it?” Cole asked. “Right now?”

“There isn’t much inside,” Lorenzo said. “A few swallows. Drink it all.”

Holding the flask, Cole glanced at Jace, who nodded encouragingly. Mira took his free hand and squeezed it.

Braced for a nasty flavor, Cole put the mouth of the flask to his lips and tipped it. Somewhat viscous fluid reached his tongue, flowing slowly and tasting mildly sweet, like grapes and vanilla. After he swallowed three times he upended the flask until the flow stopped.

CHAPTER  
— 22 —  
**ALTERNATIVES**

**L**orenzo studied Cole intently. “What did you feel?”

Licking his lips, Cole set down the flask. “Nothing, really. It tasted pretty good.”

“No flicker in reality?” Lorenzo asked. “No temporary sense of disconnection? No physical sensation of moving out of sync?”

“I don’t think so,” Cole said. “I was focused on drinking every drop. It came out kind of slowly.”

Lorenzo nodded.

“You look concerned,” Mira said.

Lorenzo cocked his head. “I saw none of the indicators I would have expected if Cole had, in fact, detached from his path through time.”

“The potion didn’t work?” Violet asked.

Lorenzo dragged his fingers through his hair. “I can’t be certain. We should proceed under the assumption that it may have failed.”

“I thought Kendo made it with the best team ever,” Jace said.

“They were attempting something that had never been done,” Lorenzo said. “And the potion is untested. It might have worked undetectably. The effect could be active. We can’t be sure.”

“We’ll try to stop Ramarro either way,” Cole said.

“Knowing the potion worked would influence our tactics,” Lorenzo said. “If it worked, you would emphasize gaining information. If you do return to this point in time, your accomplishments will disappear. All you will have is what you learned.”

“But I might not return,” Cole said.

“I didn’t feel anything out of the ordinary,” Violet volunteered.

“You may not return,” Lorenzo said. “This might be the only chance we get.”

“The focus might be different depending on whether the potion worked,” Mira said, “but either way, we need to try to stop Ramarro.”

“True,” Lorenzo said, holding up the pendant. “If Ramarro gets free, the pendant will be drawn from wherever it is to the Far North Cache. Kendo wanted to control where Ramarro would return.”

“Ramarro has to come out at that cache?” Mira asked.

“Think of the pendant as the door and the Far North Cache as the key,” Lorenzo said. “As Ramarro forces his way out, Kendo believes the pendant will be summoned to the cache, wrenched across space and time if necessary.”

“If you’re wearing the pendant, would it bring you with it?” Jace asked.

“Probably not,” Lorenzo said. “But I would follow.”

“Does it matter where we keep the pendant?” Cole asked.

“We need to keep it from Owandell,” Lorenzo said. “Or anyone who might try to aid Ramarro from the outside. And while the pendant remains in our possession, we want it far from the cache.”

“Should you keep the pendant?” Jace asked.

“I’m good at hiding,” Lorenzo said. “And Owandell is not hunting me.”

“What should we do now?” Cole asked. “If Ramarro will be free so soon, what is the next step?”

“Recruit help,” Lorenzo said. “I’ll see how many Grand Shapers I can gather to our cause.”

“We should take the potion to Brogan,” Mira said. “What are the chances the Perennial Serpent will get involved?”

“I’m not sure,” Lorenzo said. “We must be ready for anything.”

“Should we consider approaching Trillian?” Cole asked.

Lorenzo raised his eyebrows. “That path is fraught with peril. And you can’t go, Cole. If this is a hypothetical future, leaving Creon will end it.”

“I could go,” Jace offered.

“How would you get back?” Violet asked. “Without Cole, nobody can open a waypoint in Elloweer.”

“How could we trust anything Trillian told us?” Mira asked.

“He supposedly can’t lie,” Cole said.

“My understanding is he absolutely cannot lie,” Lorenzo said. “And that he would not hesitate to mislead with carefully presented truth.”

“Does he see Ramarro as a rival?” Jace asked.

“The ancient accounts suggest the two torivors worked together against the



original Grand Shapers,” Lorenzo said. “It’s impossible to know whether they would have eventually turned on each other. At worst Trillian would try to completely subvert our attempt to stop Ramarro. At best he would use the opportunity to advance his own agenda to our detriment.”

“If we have no way to stop Ramarro, help from Trillian could be better than nothing,” Cole said.

“And it might also be considerably worse than nothing,” Lorenzo said.

“So for now, gather allies?” Jace said.

“Until Ramarro returns,” Violet said. “Will we have any warning?”

“I have a ring for each of you,” Lorenzo said. “If the jewels glow, it’s time to go to the Far North Cache. Cole, you must be there. Violet, do you know the destination?”

“Of course,” she said.

“The cache is shielded,” Lorenzo said. “You’ll have to come close and then use some established conduits to get inside.”

“Can you show me?” Violet asked.

Lorenzo waved a hand, and a wayport appeared. “Come with me quickly. Then we’ll go our separate ways.”

Violet stepped through the wayport, and Lorenzo followed. It remained open.

“We’ll go to the Iron Fort?” Mira asked.

“Yes,” Cole said. “Give Brogan the potion.”

“Should we tell the Host the world is ending within a day?” Jace said. “See what help he can scrounge up?”

“I wonder where my parents are,” Mira said. “And Honor and Destiny. I wish we could get Honor’s help in the fight. And Destiny’s thoughts about our plan.”

“Do you think they’re in Creon?” Jace asked.

“The chances are good if they were taken by Wayminders,” Mira said. “Some hide out here.”

Violet and Lorenzo returned through the wayport, and it closed.

“That was speedy,” Jace said.

“Master Debray showed me the pathways they established and how to access them,” Violet said. “Not complicated.”

“I’m off to recruit all the assistance I can muster,” Lorenzo said. “Feel free to use this hideout as a refuge as needed. Watch the rings. Come when they glow. Cole, you must not miss this.”

“One last question,” Cole said. “Why me? What do you expect me to do against Ramarro? Really.”

“That’s up to you,” Lorenzo said. “Your power is unique and spectacular. If you had time to fully mature, I would wager you could fight Ramarro directly, like the Grand Shapers of old.”

“We have less than a day,” Cole said.

“Fight him with everything you have,” Lorenzo said. “Attack directly. Empower those around you. Kendo Rattan felt you were our best chance. And so do I.”

Cole nodded, conscious that he was suddenly sweating. The responsibility was too great. His power was too limited. He felt sure he would disappoint everyone. “I’ll do my best.”

“That’s the most any of us can do,” Lorenzo said. A wayport opened, he stepped through, and it closed.

“Are you all right?” Mira asked.

Cole chuckled softly. “Is it that obvious?”

“A little,” she said.

“This feels . . . hopeless,” Cole said. “We’ve survived tough fights. But we’ve always had some kind of a plan. Some reason to hope.”

“We have you,” Jace said.

“In the echolands, Ramarro paralyzed us with his mind,” Cole said. “And he’s supposed to get way more powerful when he appears here. Where do we even start? He’ll just snap his fingers and turn us to dust.”

“You’re talking like we’ve already lost,” Jace said.

“Haven’t we?” Cole asked. “Without a plan, won’t we just be going to our execution?”

“So we make a plan,” Jace said.

“A plan that has a chance,” Cole said.

Jace put his hands on his hips. “Use your power.”

“Ramarro is way stronger than me,” Cole said.

“Are you sure?” Jace asked. “Kendo Rattan had hundreds of years to prepare for this. He could have focused on anybody in the world. And he is betting on you.”

“You might be more powerful than you realize,” Mira said.

“Attack Ramarro’s power,” Jace said. “I heard you shook up Owandell that way. You demolished those Enforcers. They had us, and then you scrambled

their powers and suddenly they were helpless. Nobody can do that.”

“Owandell has some skill at affecting powers,” Mira said. “But not like you. And you’re just getting started.”

“Ramarro is so strong,” Cole said. “Do you really think I could hurt his power?”

“He might be overconfident,” Jace said. “You won’t know until you try.”

“If we end up cornered, I’ll try it,” Cole said. “Feels like a long shot, though.”

“What about luring him to Earth?” Mira said. “Kendo thinks he’ll be powerless there. How certain do we need to be?”

“We need to be one hundred percent sure,” Cole said. “Earth has billions of people, Mira. If there is any doubt, we can’t risk it.”

“He might go on his own,” Jace said. “If Wayminders can find a way there, why not him?”

“If he goes on his own, it’s not our fault,” Cole said.

“We’ll keep planning throughout the day,” Mira said. “Learn all you can, Cole. You might get a second shot at this.”

“See this through, Cole,” Jace said. “Don’t expect to lose.”

“What about ‘die bravely?’” Cole asked. “Aren’t we supposed to expect to die?”

“We’re guaranteed to die,” Jace said. “All of us, no matter how we ignore it. I had to face that with the Sky Raiders. We’re all heading for the same destination. Don’t let the fear of death rattle you. It’s coming, like it or not. Let the fear melt into acceptance. The point becomes how we die. I’m not just going to die, Cole. I’m going to die *bravely*. I’m going to win victories on the way. We’ve already won some improbable battles. Survived some close calls. Why not more? Try to win. Expect to win. Maybe we’ll only live another day. Maybe another fifty years. But whenever we die, go out bravely.”

“Thanks,” Cole said, eyes stinging with tears. “I needed to hear that.”

“Don’t cry or you’ll ruin it,” Jace replied, lightly punching his shoulder.

“We all needed to hear it,” Mira said. “And remember it.”

“I tell myself all the time,” Jace said. “Don’t you?”

“Different words,” Cole said. “Some of the same ideas.”

“Ramarro is really powerful,” Violet said. “Guess what he hasn’t ever done?”

“What?” Cole asked.

“He hasn’t won,” Violet said. “Not here in the Outskirts. Not ever. He isn’t perfect. He was stopped last time. Let’s get him again.”

“More good words,” Mira said. “If we expect to lose, it’s going to happen.”

Cole nodded. “Let’s find a way to win. Should we go?”

“The Iron Fort,” Mira said.

Violet took Cole’s hand. He invigorated her power, and a wayport opened.

“Only way to travel,” Jace said, stepping through.

The others followed.

The frosty bite in the air startled Cole, who had braced himself for the desert heat. Coming from an underground vault, he was unaware that night had fallen. Overhead in the moonless sky, endless stars decorated the firmament, a cosmic mist of light bejeweled by many brighter bodies of varied colors. Though Cole could feel the sand beneath his feet, the starlight did little to illuminate the darkness around him. Scanning the black horizons, he could have been lost at sea as believably as in a desert.

A pair of cressets flared to life, burning bright in front of the striped tent and casting rippling highlights onto the huge serpent rearing up before him. After a brief jolt of surprise, Cole recognized the statue of the Perennial Serpent.

A figure emerged from the tent, clad in Wayminder robes but with a veiled face and an iron band around the forehead. “State your business,” a male voice demanded.

“We are here to see the Host by his invitation,” Violet said, producing Mira’s document. “May I approach?”

“You may,” the man answered.

Violet stepped into the firelight, and the guard examined the parchment. He handed it back to her with a small bow.

“Please, come inside,” he offered.

Cole, Mira, and Jace followed them into the tent. The air inside was pleasantly warm.

“The hour is late,” the guard said. “Would you prefer lodging for the night before conducting your business?”

“It’s urgent,” Cole said. “We’re hoping to talk to the Host now.”

“Highly unusual,” the guard said. “But the Host left specific instructions to grant you priority attention. Follow me.”

They passed through a wayport into the cage outside the wall, then into a guard room, then, without being searched, into the office where they had met

the Host previously. The office was empty except for the four kids and the guard who had accompanied them.

A moment later a wayport opened, and the Host stepped through, wearing long pajamas and a sleeping cap. It looked like he had recently splashed his face with water, but his eyes remained a bit bleary.

“Welcome at this uncomfortable hour,” the Host said. “Forgive my appearance. I understand the matter is urgent.”

“Ramarro will be free within a day,” Cole said.

The Host sobered, his gaze sharpening. “This is certain?”

“Absolutely,” Cole said.

The Host’s eyes flicked to the guard. “Leave us.”

A wayport opened, and the guard exited. The wayport closed behind him.

“Who else knows?” the Host asked.

“Lorenzo Debray,” Cole said. “He’s trying to get help from other Grand Shapers.”

The Host coughed out a laugh. “Do you know how preposterous all of this sounds?”

“Not really,” Cole said. “But I’ve seen Ramarro. And I spent the last several hours with Lorenzo Debray and Kendo Rattan.”

“You realize you are wanted for possible regicide?” the Host said. “All of you have been implicated in the disappearance of the High King.”

“Already?” Cole asked. “I mean, what are you talking about?”

A smile touched the Host’s lips. “I gather information swiftly. I don’t believe the accusation. But many will.”

“We think it was Owandell,” Mira said. “Working with Wayminders. They took my mother, Honor, and Destiny as well.”

The Host furrowed his brow. “The princesses were not mentioned.”

“Father recently recovered them from Owandell,” Mira said.

“So it was retaliation,” the Host said.

“Why do you believe us?” Jace asked.

The Host pressed his fingertips together. “Because I learned long ago to see beyond the manipulative lies those who crave power use to advance their agendas.”

“What if we’re lying?” Jace asked.

“I have corroborated enough of your story to believe you,” the Host said. “Now a difficult question—can Ramarro be defeated? Or is Owandell about to

become the most powerful man in the five kingdoms? Would we do better to accept the inevitable and align ourselves with this torivor?"

"If we're cowards, maybe," Jace said.

"There is an important distinction between cowardice and prudence," the Host said. "I am charged with protecting the occupants of the retreat. I am the latest in a proud history of successful hosts who accepted this charge. I do not intend to be the last. Ofttimes negotiation can accomplish what strength of arms cannot."

"Ramarro likes to negotiate," Cole said. "If you want to be a puppet, he might give you the chance. But nothing more. He will control this world."

The Host leaned forward. "Yet even he cannot be everywhere at once. If Ramarro doesn't destroy the world, some of his supposed puppets may gradually return to governing themselves."

"I don't think you understand him," Cole said. "The first Grand Shapers feared him and Trillian for a reason. They really might destroy this place. And if not, we'll all be slaves. Including Owandell, whatever he thinks."

The Host heaved a sigh. "Sadly, this fits my understanding of the torivors. I've been researching them since our previous conversation."

"Any weaknesses?" Jace asked.

"That's a big part of the problem," the Host said. "Ruthless. Brilliant. Incalculably powerful. If the Grand Shapers hadn't imprisoned them promptly, the torivors would have ruled the Outskirts long ago. How much do we know about the upcoming return?"

"He'll be free within a day," Cole said. "We know where he will show up."

"Where?" the Host asked.

"The Far North Cache," Cole said.

"Ah yes, out of the way, shielded, hidden in plain sight," the Host said. "And a torivor will be there within a day. How can I assist?"

"We need to stop him," Cole said. "We need all the help we can get. People to stand against him. Grand Shapers. Warriors."

"What use is an army against a torivor?" the Host wondered.

"Better than no army," Jace replied.

"Yes, I see," the Host said. "Now or never. Try to stop him when he is most off-balance, while his freedom is new. At worst, die clean rather than inheriting a fate worse than death."

"That's the idea," Mira said. "It's your best chance to protect the Iron Fort."

“It might be,” the Host said. “I’ll assemble a task force. There are limits to my influence. I have no direct contact with the Grand Shapers, but I can try to signal a couple of them who provide me with information from time to time.”

“What about the current Grand Shaper?” Mira asked.

“Kezlyn Vedor is in hiding,” the Host said. “It’s a big part of why she is still alive. Owandell has a major sympathizer in Governor Vass. He has many Enforcers in his employ. Should you wish to find the abducted king, you may want to look there.”

“Who is Governor Vass?” Cole asked.

“The governor of Creon,” Mira said. “The acting ruler. Technically a representative of my father.”

“Appointed by Owandell,” the Host said. “I believe he would abandon the crown for Owandell in a heartbeat. Perhaps he already has.”

“It could be useful to find Honor and Destiny,” Mira said.

“We’ll look into it,” Cole agreed.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you all look exhausted,” the Host said. “If we really have a day before Ramarro returns, you could benefit from some rest.”

“He has a point,” Violet murmured.

“We can rest for a few hours,” Cole said. “We’ll want to be sharp when Ramarro arrives.”

“I agree,” Mira said. “But first, I need to see my sister.”

## CHAPTER

# 23

## REJUVENATED

The older woman who answered the door at Elegance's residence looked sleepy and bothered. "Who is knocking at this hour?" she asked, taking in Cole, Mira, Jace, Violet, and the guard escorting them.

"We need to speak with Elegance immediately," Mira said.

The woman looked scandalized. "Her Highness needs her rest," the woman scolded. "This is highly irregular. Next time schedule an appointment through proper channels. I will be speaking to the Host about this."

"We already spoke to him," Mira said. "I am Miracle Pemberton, and this is an emergency."

The woman paled and looked to the guard.

"All true," he said.

The woman became flustered. "Well, that is something else; pardon me, Your Highness. Please come inside while I fetch your sister."

Cole and the others entered a comfortable room with tasteful furnishings. They waited while the servant woman bustled out of the room. A couple of minutes later, Elegance entered the room in a long white nightgown, her hair disheveled, her eyes squinty. Cole thought she looked much younger than when she was all dressed up.

"I wish I could say it was nice to see you," Elegance said, rubbing at her eyes. "Can't this wait until morning? Ethel mentioned an emergency?"

"Mother and Father have been abducted, along with Honor and Destiny," Mira said. "Your power has been terrorizing Creon as the Perennial Serpent for hundreds of years. And the world ends tomorrow."

Elegance blinked. "Are you serious?"

"Completely," Mira said. "Ramarro will be free within a day."

"That all fell apart quickly," Elegance said.



“It’s Owandell,” Mira said. “He’s done with caution because Ramarro is almost free.”

“Is my power really the Perennial Serpent?” Elegance asked, almost as if the idea were romantic.

“We’re pretty sure,” Mira said.

“What can we do?” Elegance asked.

“We have to try to stand against Ramarro,” Mira said. “And I want to rescue Mother and our sisters. Maybe they can help us.” She held up the flask. “And we want to recruit Brogan.”

“Brogan is in no condition—” Elegance began.

“This will make him young again,” Mira said.

Elegance stared. “Impossible,” she whispered.

“It’s one of a kind,” Mira said. “Devised by a team of Grand Shapers.”

“It performs complicated time shifting,” Violet added. “His physical characteristics will go back in time while he remains in the present.”

“You’re serious,” Elegance said, seemingly not wanting to hope in vain.

“It’s our understanding,” Mira said. “Can we try it?”

Elegance gave a quick nod. “Of course. This way.”

She led them into a sumptuous bedroom, where the old man rested on a large bed, propped up by a semicircle of pillows. “Elegance?” he asked. “Is everything all right?”

“It’s Miracle and her friends again,” Elegance said. “Very little is all right. They want your help. They have a potion that could restore your youth.”

“Nonsense,” Brogan said.

“It’s unique,” Mira said. “Made by a group of Grand Shapers.”

“And they wish to test it on me?” Brogan asked.

“It was given to us to use on whoever we want,” Mira said. “It will mean you can never leave Creon.”

“I have no travel plans,” Brogan said. “How is this possible?”

“Unprecedented time shifting,” Violet said. “It will supposedly give you the body of yesteryear today.”

“Last year I didn’t look much better than right now,” Brogan said. “A decade ago either.”

“We’re up against the end of the world,” Mira said. “The king and queen have been abducted. Two of my sisters as well. And Ramarro returns tomorrow. We need help.”

“Give me the drink,” Brogan said.

Mira tugged at the stopper and couldn't get it off. Elegance took the flask from her, gripped it tightly, and yanked it open. She handed the flask to her husband.

Brogan took a probative sip. “Not foul.” He drained the flask.

The transformation was so sudden that Cole wondered if he had missed it with a blink. A young man, still holding the flask, looked in astonishment at his hands. He threw aside the sheets and swung his legs out of the bed. A couple of pillows fell to the floor as he stood up.

“I remember what this felt like,” Brogan said in a voice that was similar, but fuller and firmer. “I remember like it was yesterday. As if the rest has been a bad dream.”

He wasn't just young—he was tall, and his shoulders were broad and strong. His strained nightshirt had clearly been tailored for a frailer man. He clenched a fist, and veins stood out on his solid forearm.

“Look at you,” Elegance said.

“How cruel if this is temporary,” Brogan said. “How long is it supposed to last?”

“A lifetime,” Mira said. “As long as you don't leave Creon, you should age normally.”

“Elegance, do you think you could find me more suitable attire?” Brogan asked.

Her eyes wandered up and down his new physique. “It's late. Give me a few minutes.”

Elegance ushered the kids out of the room, ordered Ethel to see to their needs, and then rushed away. Jace asked for a sandwich. Cole followed his example. Mira inquired about a restroom, and Violet seconded the request.

“That worked quickly,” Jace said after Ethel led the girls away. “I wonder if your potion worked just as well.”

“I hope so,” Cole said. “It would be nice to have two shots at this.”

“Don't count on it,” Jace said.

“You know,” Cole said. “This might be the perfect time to tell Mira how you feel about her.”

“Lower your voice,” Jace said, looking around worriedly.

“I'm just saying, none of this might really be happening,” Cole said. “Not permanently. I could let you know what she says when I get back. You could

know without actually asking.”

“And what if this is real?” Jace asked. “Not just a preview.”

“You’ll still know,” Cole said.

Jace shook his head. “It’s stupid. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to you,” Cole pressed.

“Way too much to risk ruining it,” Jace said. “I know she can’t love me. I know we’re too young. I know she’s a princess and I’m a former slave. If I don’t say anything, I can stay close. I can protect her and help her. She knows I care. She can see that. It’s enough.”

“What if she feels the same way?” Cole asked.

Jace shook his head again. “Don’t be thick. No way.”

“But what if?”

“If she loves me like that, it’ll come out.”

“Will it? You talk about dying bravely. What about living bravely?”

Jace glared at Cole. “Are you giving me bravery lessons?”

“Maybe when it comes to Mira.”

“I’m brave enough.”

Brogan opened the door and emerged wearing a robe. It must have been big on him before, because it fit reasonably well, though probably a bit clingier than intended. He held a sword with a polished blade and gilded designs on the hilt.

“Elegance went hunting for clothes?” Brogan asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said.

“The others?” Brogan asked.

“Ethel is making sandwiches,” Jace said.

“The girls needed the restroom,” Cole said.

Brogan swished the sword through the air. “You can’t imagine how good this feels.”

“Cool sword,” Cole said.

“It belonged to my father,” Brogan said. “It never collected dust. We kept it in a place of honor. But I have not held it in decades.” The blade hissed through the air. “In my later years, I lamented that I knew more than ever but my body was beginning to fail. And then I became an invalid. A dormant repository of combat ability.”

“You don’t feel rusty?” Cole asked.

“It’s a little strange,” Brogan said, shifting from side to side. “But rusty? No. I feel more myself than I have in ages. There may be a few kinks to work out.” He

tossed the sword in the air, let it spin twice, and deftly caught it by the hilt. “Not many.”

Elegance entered with a bundle of clothes. “Brogan, don’t parade around in that robe! And with your sword? Where is Miracle?”

The comment made Cole notice how the robe hung open at his chest, and his bare legs extended below the hemline. It wasn’t exactly how somebody would normally dress to impress a princess.

“Sorry, Ella,” Brogan said. “You found better attire?”

Elegance thrust the bundle of clothes at him. “Go make yourself decent. We have company.”

Brogan retreated.

Miracle returned with Violet.

“Success?” Miracle asked.

“He has clothes now,” Elegance said.

“And his sword,” Jace added.

Ethel entered with sandwiches for Cole and Jace.

“You’re not hungry?” Elegance asked Miracle.

“We had oranges,” Miracle replied.

“You have oranges?” Jace exclaimed.

“Coming right away,” Ethel said, leaving the room.

Brogan emerged again just after the oranges arrived. He looked dapper in a shirt, a vest, trousers, and boots. His sword hung sheathed over his shoulder. “I need armor,” he said.

“Are we charging into battle?” Elegance asked.

“Soon as we know where to charge,” Brogan replied.

“I like this guy,” Jace murmured.

“Is battle the only option?” Elegance asked.

“How sure is your information?” Brogan inquired.

“We got it from Lorenzo Debray and Kendo Rattan,” Mira said. “Lorenzo gave us the potion, too.”

“Ramarro the torivor will gain freedom tomorrow,” Brogan said.

“Within the day,” Miracle confirmed. “We have rings that will notify us when he is about to get loose. Violet will take us to the Far North Cache, where we’ll face him.”

“What hope have we of success?” Brogan asked.

“Cole’s power,” Mira said. “He can energize the powers of others to work in

any kingdom. And he can directly alter powers.”

Brogan fixed his gaze on Cole. “How confident are you?”

“It’s a torivor,” Cole said. “I’ll try not to fail.”

“You’ll need all the help you can get,” Brogan said. “And we’ll probably fall.” He turned to Mira. “What about your mother and sister? Any leads?”

“We’re almost sure it was Owandell,” Mira said. “The Host suspects that Governor Vass might know something.”

“Vass is certainly controlled by Owandell,” Brogan said. “It would be a place to start.”

“We think Owandell is working with Wayminders,” Mira said.

“Another potential Arthur Vass connection,” Brogan said. “And the world ends tomorrow?”

“Unless we stop it,” Cole said.

“Who of you can fight?” Brogan asked.

“Jace,” Mira said. “His golden rope is from Sambria. When Cole charges it, he’s really dangerous.”

“Show me,” Brogan said.

Jace held out the golden strand, and Cole touched it, pushing power into it.

The rope shot out and picked up a chair.

“Quick,” Brogan said, raising his fists. “I’m going to kill you now.”

The other end of the rope shot out, bound Brogan’s ankles together, and hauled him into the air upside down. Elegance gasped.

“If I believed you, I’d slam you into the wall,” Jace said.

“And I’d be trying to slash the rope,” Brogan said. “Please set me down.”

Jace carefully laid Brogan on the floor, set down the chair, and retracted the rope. Brogan hopped to his feet.

Cole drew his sword. “I have a Jumping Sword,” he said.

“A what?” Brogan replied. “I’m not familiar.”

“He can make big jumps with it,” Mira said. “I have one too. And with Cole’s help, Violet can open as many wayports as she likes.”

Brogan raised his eyebrows. “Very useful. No limits?”

“We haven’t found any,” Violet said.

“So without Cole, you all lose your advantages,” Brogan said. “Do you need to touch the item and people you’re energizing?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “To start the connection. Then I don’t need contact.”

“You can’t initiate the connection without touch?”

“So far. I’m working on it.”

“How many people can you support at a time?” Brogan asked.

“At least five,” Cole said. “Probably more. Maybe a lot more.”

“How long before you get exhausted?” Brogan asked.

“I haven’t found those limits,” Cole said.

Brogan whistled. “Not bad. Incredible, really. Do any of you have authority from the king?”

Cole produced the medallion.

“You speak for him?” Brogan asked in astonishment.

“He authorized me not long ago,” Cole said. “I’m not sure if there was an official announcement. And we were implicated in his disappearance.”

“The seal could provide leverage with the governor,” Brogan said.

“I feel like people don’t believe me sometimes when I use it,” Cole said.

“Your position has not been publicized?” Brogan asked.

“I don’t think so,” Cole said. “It barely happened.”

“What about your power?” Brogan asked. “Your abilities should command great renown.”

“Not too many people know about me yet,” Cole said. “I’m just learning how to use my power. The Enforcers are catching on.”

“We’re going to the governor’s mansion,” Brogan said. “I’ll need Jace, Cole, and Violet.”

“What about me?” Mira asked.

“We’ll be in his bedchamber,” Brogan said. “In those close confines, your Jumping Sword will be largely irrelevant. You have too much strategic value to be risked on this. Stay with Elegance. We won’t be long.”

Mira looked like she wanted to protest but gave a little nod.

“May I borrow the seal, Cole?” Brogan asked. “We need to bluff this governor. He’s smart and tough, but no hero. I think we can get what we need.”

“Sure,” Cole said, taking off the medallion and handing it over.

“You want me to take us to his room?” Violet asked.

“It’s almost certainly how Owandell took the queen,” Brogan said.

“Not just into a building,” Violet fretted. “Not even just into the governor’s mansion. Into his bedroom! I could be more than exiled. I could be executed.”

“You could be formally executed,” Brogan said. “Or simply killed by the guards with the rest of us. These are desperate times. Our foes are reckless and about to win. They have broken rules. We must break them too.”

Violet nodded. “Understood. I know the mansion. I’m not sure how to locate his bedroom.”

“Do you know the courtyard with the square fountain?” Brogan asked.

“Yes,” Violet said.

“The largest, highest balcony on the east side belongs to his bedchamber,” Brogan said. “The room will be shielded. Have you bypassed shielding before?”

“Not yet,” Violet said. “With enough power I should be able to manage.”

“There are some Wayminders here at the Iron Fort who could probably do it,” Brogan said. “I completely trust none of them, and am unsure who would be willing.”

“Cole?” Violet asked, holding out a hand.

“You’re going now?” Elegance asked.

“Let me feel it out first,” Violet said.

“Can you travel there from here?” Mira asked.

“There are too many protections on the Iron Fort for me to open a wayport to the outside from the inside,” Violet said. “But I should be able to feel out possible destinations.”

Cole took her hand and steadily energized her power.

“I see the mansion,” Violet narrated, eyes closed. “I see the balcony. Yes, the bedroom is heavily shielded. I don’t know if I can push through. I could try. I bet it would raise alarms.”

“What about the balcony?” Brogan asked.

“Shielded too,” Violet said. “Not as heavily. Probably anywhere we go will raise alarms.”

She released Cole’s hand. He took it as a signal to let the connection drop.

“We want to get in and out quickly,” Brogan said. “There will be guards. We should take Vass to someplace he won’t expect.”

“He’s a Wayminder?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Brogan said. “And he has guards who will try to rescue him.”

“Can we use one of Lorenzo’s hideouts?” Jace asked.

“We shouldn’t without permission,” Violet said. “And we can’t come back here.”

Brogan shook his head. “No location in Creon is as impenetrable as this fort, but the Host won’t want involvement with kidnapping the governor, no matter the reason. Elegance and I have access to a conduit that will take us to the tent

in the desert, bypassing security protocols. You can use it with us to get out at our convenience. But we can't come back in with Vass."

"I can use Cole to our advantage," Violet said. "We'll escape through three wayports. They might trace the first. But I don't know anybody who could follow three jumps. I'll finish at an isolated spot in the wilderness—a high ridgetop. I used to go there to get away and think."

"That should work," Brogan said. "You want to try for the balcony rather than the room?"

"The room is too heavily shielded," Violet said. "Even if I can break through, it will take time. They will have a long warning."

"There are glass doors from the balcony into the bedchamber," Brogan said.

"I noticed them," Violet confirmed. "How do you know?"

"I remember," Brogan said. "We'll want to smash them immediately. Then cover the door to the bedroom with a wayport so no regular guards can get in. Make them open a wayport beyond it if they want access."

"Clever," Violet said. "Use a wayport as a shield."

"I'll grab Vass," Brogan said. "Violet, once we're in, you open a way out. Jace, cover us with your rope. Cole, keep the sword handy, but your main task is to keep everyone charged up. Feeling good?"

"The plan makes sense," Violet said.

Brogan placed a hand on Jace's shoulder. "Bring something heavy with that rope to smash the doors." Brogan scanned the room. "That end table is made of stone."

Elegance pouted. "I love that piece."

Brogan raised an eyebrow.

Elegance waved her hands dismissively. "I know—it's an emergency, no time; I remember this side of you."

Brogan grinned. "A little like old times."

"The old times were scary," Elegance said.

"At least scary isn't tedious," Brogan said.

"Have I been tedious?" Elegance asked.

"You have been wonderful," Brogan clarified. "Old age is tedious."

"Do you want armor?" Elegance asked.

"Not for this," Brogan said. "I'll want some later." He nodded at Cole. "Do your thing."

"The rope is still energized," Cole told Jace. As the rope extended and curled



around the solid stone table, Brogan asked Ethel to open a wayport to the desert tent. The wayport appeared a moment later.

They all went through and gathered on the chilly sand beneath cold stars. Elegance pulled Brogan close and whispered into his ear. Mira gave Cole a hug. “Take care,” she said. Cole touched Violet and reestablished their connection.

Violet squinted her eyes shut. Cole felt her drawing a lot of energy and fed her plenty. She trembled and growled a little, and a wayport opened.

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**GOVERNOR**

**H**urry after me,” Brogan said. “Jace next.” He lunged through the portal, sword ready. Then Jace ducked in, trailed by his rope and the table. Mira looked disappointed to be left behind. Cole gave her a wave, energized his Jumping Sword, and went through in time to see Jace bash a pair of elegant doors into splinters and shards.

Making sure he kept power to the rope, his sword, and Violet, Cole followed Brogan and Jace into a spacious bedroom, fragments of wood and glass crunching underfoot. Violet followed closely. A portly man in a white nightcap and long white sleepwear was fumbling out of bed. Brogan charged the man, seized him by the neck, and held his sword threateningly. “Not a sound,” Brogan warned.

“I believe your manner of entry will suffice to raise the alarm,” the man said. Cole thought his voice stayed surprisingly steady given the circumstances.

A shimmering wayport appeared in front of the doorway into the bedroom, blocking entry. Another trembling disturbance took shape in the middle of the room. A third wayport formed by the tall clock in the corner, and a man with leather armor visible beneath his Wayminder robes stumbled out. Jace hit the newcomer hard enough with the stone table that he flew back through the wayport without touching the ground.

“Call them off, Vass,” Brogan warned.

The governor widened his eyes and shook his head. Brogan squeezed his neck.

“No,” Vass croaked. “Slay me if you must.”

Cole heard shouting from behind the door blocked by the wayport. Apparently the guards were frustrated.

Two other wayports appeared, one near the bed, the other just inside the door to the balcony. Another wayport opened right in front of the wayport by the bed, allowing no space for a person to emerge. Cole realized Violet was probably covering it. An armored guard raced from the wayport by the clock. Jace brought the stone table down on top of the guard with a clangorous crunch. Another guard came through behind him, and the free end of the golden rope wrapped around his waist, slung him brusquely against the ceiling, then slammed him to the floor.

Brogan dragged the governor to the wayport in the center of the room. "This one?" Brogan asked Violet.

"Yes," she confirmed.

Brogan hurled the governor through as a guard emerged from the wayport by the balcony. "Go!" Brogan urged, rushing to intercept the guard. He dodged a swing from the guard's sword and cut him down with a single stroke. More guards came pouring from the wayport by the balcony.

Cole aimed his Jumping Sword at the wayport in the center of the room. "Away!" he cried, leaping forward and soaring low and quick through the wayport.

He emerged with a stumble onto a brushy prairie he had never seen before, the shadowy surroundings barely perceivable on the moonless night. The wayport and the stars shed enough light to see that Vass stood perhaps twenty feet away in a crouched pose. A glimmering wayport opened before him.

"Away!" Cole shouted, streaking forward and lowering his shoulder before plowing into the governor. Cole spun to the ground, and the governor went down too. Hopping to his feet, Cole blocked access to the wayport.

"Out of my way," Vass snapped, lunging forward, one arm raised.

Cole stood his ground and slashed the outstretched arm. The governor cried out and recoiled.

"Stay down!" Cole yelled.

From his knees, Vass dove at Cole's legs and wrapped both arms around them. Cole fell back hard, losing hold of his Jumping Sword. Ignoring Cole, Vass scrambled for the wayport he had opened only to have a golden rope lasso him and yank him to the dirt.

Brogan and Violet came through the wayport where Jace stood, and it closed, making the night a tad darker.

"Quick, Violet," Brogan said, racing forward, sword in hand. "Another

gateway.”

Cole’s power remained connected to Jace’s rope, his own sword, and Violet’s power. As Cole grabbed his sword and stood up, a new waypoint shimmered into existence.

“Send him through,” Brogan instructed.

Using his rope, Jace forced Vass through the waypoint and followed. Cole saw a new waypoint open not far off. An armored guard rushed out.

“Go,” Brogan urged.

The guard ran toward them, but Cole hurried through the waypoint. Brogan sprang through right after with Violet at his heels, and the waypoint disappeared.

They stood atop a dark hill, unseen clouds hiding most of the stars.

“Again,” Brogan said.

A new waypoint appeared.

“How is she doing this?” Vass asked.

Jace pushed Vass through with the rope. The others followed.

Cole emerged on a rocky ridgetop. Stars were visible again, though not as strikingly abundant as in the desert. The waypoint closed.

“Now we’re alone,” Brogan said.

“You’ll hang for this,” Vass threatened.

“Be more concerned about your own neck,” Brogan said.

“You have broken every—”

“Stop,” Brogan said in a hard tone. He knelt beside Vass and seized the front of his nightshirt. “We don’t have time to waste. I want to know where Owandell has stashed the king and queen.”

“I have no idea what you are—”

Brogan shook him sharply. “Then you are in enormous trouble. Because I believe you do. You are on the wrong side of this, Vass, and it is going to cost you. You’re in collusion with an enemy of the monarchy. I am here on behalf of the crown to rescue the High King, his consort, and two of his daughters. They were taken by Owandell using Wayminders. I am happy to employ any means necessary.”

“You are speaking nonsense,” Vass accused.

“Cole, tell me about his power,” Brogan said.

Cole reached down in the dimness and took the governor’s soft, plump hand. He could feel the darkness entwined with his considerable power. “He’s been shapecrafted.”

“I would love some light,” Brogan said. He backed away from Vass, took a small oil lamp from a pouch at his waist, clicked an igniter that shed sparks until the wick lit, then set the lamp near Vass.

Blood drenched the formerly white sleeve of the governor’s nightshirt where Cole had sliced him. Elsewhere the smooth fabric had been torn or stained with dirt. The governor’s face was flushed and sweaty as he lay there panting. He sneered. “Don’t pretend to know anything about my power.”

“Show him what you can do to his power,” Brogan said.

Cole remembered when Morgassa had mangled his power, destroying his ability to use it just as he was first discovering how. He recalled how violated he felt to have those intangible elements within himself corrupted, how exhausted and wounded the ordeal had left him, and how baffled he was to lose touch with the innate abilities he had just begun to understand. He also remembered plunging into the slipstream in the echolands, denying the nearly irresistible summons of the homesong as impurities were scoured from his power, hurricane currents howling around and through him, eventually healing his ability.

Cole knew he had the capacity to mangle the governor’s power. He had already done it to an Enforcer in the heat of combat. But could he do it to a captive? Could he do it calmly and deliberately?

They needed the location of the king and queen. If this man collaborated with Owandell, he was an enemy. He was not innocent. He was conspiring to destroy the world.

Cole didn’t want to maim the man’s power. No matter how good the reason.

He could heal it, though.

Exerting his energy, Cole burned away the impurities from the governor’s shaping power. Vass squirmed.

“Hold still,” Brogan demanded.

When Cole finished, he released the governor’s hand.

“What have you done?” Vass panted. He looked haggard.

“I undid the shapecrafting,” Cole said.

“You can’t just . . . ,” Vass began. Then he closed his eyes, breathing slowly. He coughed. “You’re telling the truth.”

“Yes,” Cole said. “And you’re helping to end the world.”

“Change the world,” Vass corrected, opening his eyes. “Not end it.”

“You’re handing it over to a being we can’t trust,” Brogan said.

“The shapecrafting increased my vitality,” Vass said, sagging back to lay flat. “I feel the absence. And I also feel . . . better inside. I had forgotten how it felt.”

“They twisted up your power,” Cole said. “They injured it. I fixed it.”

“He can damage it,” Brogan warned. “Leave it in tatters.”

“I believe it,” Vass said. He raised his head enough to look at Cole. The effort made him tremble. “Will you?”

“I don’t want to,” Cole said. “We need your information.”

“I don’t have it,” Vass said. “Why would Owandell tell me?”

“The Wayminders who aided him were your people,” Brogan said. “Big events are happening in Creon. Owandell would have come to you. You’re playing too dumb to be telling the truth.”

“You want to talk about dumb?” Vass asked. “What fool would stand against Owandell when his victory is imminent? Find the king. Don’t find the king. Does it matter? This is not going to be the same world in a matter of days.”

“If it doesn’t matter, tell us,” Brogan said.

“And cross Owandell?” Vass asked with a tired chuckle. “Now?”

“You’re scared of Owandell?” Cole asked. “He’ll be as much a puppet as the rest of us.”

“That’s one theory,” Vass said flatly.

“Shred his power, Cole,” Brogan said. “Let’s see if that softens him up.”

“If you would wound my power, how are you any better than the worst of them?” Vass asked.

“Owandell stripped five young girls of their powers,” Brogan said through gritted teeth. “Against their will, halting their development and sending them into hiding. One of those girls became my wife.”

Vass pushed himself up onto one elbow and looked at Brogan. “Wait, that’s not possible.”

“I’m Brogan Holt.”

Vass scowled in confusion. “You should be ancient.”

“I’m not,” Brogan said. “And I am going to recover my royal sisters and their parents. Whatever it takes. Cole?”

Vass glanced at Cole. “I wouldn’t. Owandell could appear at any moment.”

“I’d welcome it,” Brogan said.

“Owandell ran away the last time he met Cole,” Jace asserted.

“I’m so sorry,” Cole said, reaching for the governor’s hand, unsure whether the gesture was a bluff and uncertain how much damage he might be willing to

inflict.

“Very well,” Vass snapped, pulling his hand away. “My best guess is they’re at the Island Keep.”

“In Sambria?” Violet asked. “The Enforcer stronghold?”

“There is only one,” Vass said.

“How sure are you?” Brogan asked.

“Nearly certain,” Vass said.

“What if he’s lying?” Jace asked.

“Then I give him my word that he will suffer,” Brogan said. “And I’m not lying. Any revisions?”

“You now know what I strongly suspect,” Vass said.

“You were stalling,” Brogan said.

“I knew help might arrive,” Vass said. “Evidently it will not. Owandell is very busy right now. May I go?”

“What more do you know?” Brogan asked.

“Broad question,” Vass said. “I can tell you what I believe. All of you will be dead before long, no matter what you do with me. You’ll be fugitives from the Creonese government and hunted by Owandell. Not to mention his mentor.”

“You’ll be coming with us until we can verify your claim,” Brogan said.

“Then perhaps you’ll perish in Sambria rather than Creon,” Vass said with a sniff. “Holding me serves no purpose. I have nothing more you need.”

“I need your information to be correct,” Brogan said soberly. “Violet, open a —”

With a flash, the Perennial Serpent appeared, head rearing up above thick coils as the hood flared wide. Off to one side stood a figure in a black, cowled robe, the hood drawn up to conceal all features. Based on the description Cole had heard, he suspected it was the Ancient One.

Brogan whirled and slashed, opening a long wound in the white scales along the nearest coil. The serpent struck at him and got stabbed in the snout, then vanished to reappear behind Violet.

A large wayport opened between Violet and the overgrown snake, and Violet retreated toward Jace and Cole. Leaning around the wayport, Jace whipped the snake in the face with the golden rope, and Brogan raced around the other side to attack the serpent again. Coils writhing, the Perennial Serpent withdrew from the onslaught. Brogan pursued, and the snake disappeared again, only to materialize near Cole.

The previous wayport closed, and Violet opened a new wayport, once again blocking the serpent. Jace rushed around the wayport, sharply and relentlessly lashing at the snake's face. The serpent flinched jerkily away from the strikes, gradually retreating.

"Should we go?" Violet asked.

"Maybe we can take it," Cole said, encouraged by how both Brogan and Jace had managed to put the huge snake on the defensive.

The Perennial Serpent vanished again and reappeared behind Brogan, striking immediately, huge mouth closing over the top of his shoulder before he could react. Brogan disappeared.

A wayport opened in front of Cole. "Go!" Violet yelled, shoving him toward it.

Jumping Sword ready, Cole hesitated, but something tackled him from behind, carrying him through the wayport onto cool sand. A dazzling array of cold stars bejeweled the sky. Nearby, cressets burned in front of a striped tent. Jace lay beside Cole, one arm wrapped around him.

As Cole scrambled to his feet, the wayport closed.

When it vanished, Cole lost his connection to Violet.

Cole sprang forward to where the wayport had been. There was no evidence it had ever existed. Cole squeezed the hilt of the Jumping Sword as if trying to crush it. He wanted to leap farther than he ever had, but at what? Panting, he whirled to face Jace.

"We abandoned her," Cole said.

"I thought she would follow," Jace said. "She always comes last."

Cole slashed the Jumping Sword across the sand, sending up a gritty spray. He felt empty, sick, and helpless. "They got her!"

"Who goes there?" called a figure over by the tent.

"Us again," Jace called. "Is that you, Renni?"

"Yes," the guard replied.

"Do you know where this wayport opened from?" Cole asked. "The one we just came through?"

"I'm sorry, no," Renni said.

"Can you figure it out?" Cole pressed.

"That's beyond my ability," Renni said.

Cole kicked the sand in frustration.

"We need to get back inside the fort," Jace said.



“I can help you there,” Renni said. “Is your friend all right?”

Cole had fallen to his knees and was stabbing the sand repeatedly.

“We just lost some people,” Jace said.

Cole threw his sword down and pressed his face against the cool sand. He squeezed the grains with his hands. It had happened so quickly. Brogan was gone. Violet had been stranded. Did the serpent bite her, too? Or had she been taken prisoner?

Cole sat up and brushed sand from his forehead and cheeks. He looked out at the dark desert beyond the firelight. There was nothing he could do. No way back to Violet. No way to restore Brogan. The fight was over. He was safe, and they were gone.

“We should get inside,” Jace said.

“How do you sound so calm?” Cole complained.

Jace shrugged. “One of us should.”

Cole picked up his sword. “We could have stayed and fought.”

“Not the way that snake was starting to move,” Jace said. “Do you think you have better reflexes than Brogan? Violet did the right thing. She knew we had to go.”

“You forced me to go,” Cole said.

“Now you know how Mira feels,” Jace said.

Cole opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out.

“You had to get away,” Jace said. “You have to be there to fight Ramarro. In case we get another chance at this. And in case we don’t.”

Cole bowed his head. Maybe this was only a possible future. Or maybe not. “Violet. Brogan.”

“I know,” Jace said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“What are we going to tell Elegance?”

“How bravely he protected us.”

## CHAPTER

# 25

## EMPOWERMENT

**G**one?" Elegance asked, tears shimmering in her slightly crazed eyes. "What do you mean, gone?"

"Brogan was bitten by the Perennial Serpent, and he disappeared," Jace said. "The same thing happened to our friend Twitch. He could have been sent far away. He could be dead. He fought so bravely."

Elegance gripped the back of a sofa to steady herself. "I don't need to hear that. Of course he fought bravely. He always fought bravely. But he never fell."

"It wasn't a fair fight," Jace said. "The snake—"

"It was never a fair fight," Elegance interrupted. "I'm sure he fared better than any man could have."

"He got in some good shots," Jace said.

Elegance held up a hand to stop him. "I was already sure of that. You're not certain he's dead?"

"No," Jace said.

"Then he probably survived," Elegance said. "I've thought him dead several times over the years. Still, this is inconvenient and distressing. I need some time."

"Can we just—" Cole began.

"Children," Elegance said in a harder tone. "Heed me. I need some time."

"Come on," Mira said, herding them out of the room into a different parlor. Renni had brought them to Elegance, and she remained with them. Cole plopped down on an armchair. Jace looked disgruntled, pacing in silence.

"What about Violet?" Mira asked.

"She didn't make it back," Cole said. "The wayport closed before she came through. We don't know what happened to her."

"That's terrible," Mira said.

“And it leaves us without a way to get around,” Jace said. “What if our rings signal us to go greet Ramarro?”

“I’m sure Elegance will have solutions,” Mira said.

“If she ever speaks to us again,” Jace grumbled.

“The Host is sympathetic to your cause,” Renni said. “I expect he will assist as needed.”

“What do we do now?” Cole asked. “How do we make the most of our time?”

“Maybe we sleep,” Mira said. “At least for a few hours. Don’t you want to be fresh if we have to go fight a torivor?”

Mentioning sleep somehow gave Cole permission to notice how tired he felt. His eyes were irritated, and his throat was getting sore. When he closed his eyes experimentally, he did not want to open them. “I could sleep right now,” he said.

“Not yet,” Elegance said, entering the room.

Cole forced his eyes open. She looked refreshed.

“What do we do if you get the signal to fight Ramarro?” Elegance asked.

“We need a way to the Far North Cache,” Mira said.

“Ethel will take you,” Elegance said. “You may go, Renni.”

The guard exited.

“Will Ethel know how to get around at the cache?” Cole asked. “Lorenzo Debray showed Violet some secrets.”

“She won’t know how to access the established conduits,” Elegance said.

“We can jump the fence,” Jace said.

“Will you be joining us?” Mira asked Elegance.

“What would I do?” Elegance asked.

“The Perennial Serpent could be there,” Mira said.

Elegance clenched her jaw. “You see the irony that the distortion of my power may have killed my husband.”

“You have to stop it if you can,” Mira said.

Elegance glanced at Cole and Jace. “Miracle, Brogan was the fighter. He was the protector. How am I supposed to succeed where he failed?”

“All of your younger sisters have done it,” Mira said. “You stand and fight.”

Elegance looked at Cole and Jace again. “Perhaps you could give us a moment?”

“No, they’re part of this,” Mira said.

Elegance flushed a little. “My power is gone. Completely gone. I’m not much use in a fight. How am I supposed to help? What if I just get in the way?”

“Are you sure your power is gone?” Cole asked. “Your sisters all started regaining some of their power as it left your father.”

“I’m aware,” Elegance said. “I have not had that experience.”

“Mind if I check?” Cole asked. “I’ve had some practice helping with powers.”

Mira nodded encouragingly.

“Very well,” Elegance said, holding out a hand. “But don’t scoff. I was once quite capable.”

Cole took her hand and was mildly surprised to discover how empty she felt inside. Emptier than anyone he had ever examined.

“Is it that bad?” Elegance asked.

Cole realized his concern was showing on his face. “Give me a second,” he said, composing his expression. Exerting his power and searching hard, he found a dead spot at her center, like a spent lump of charcoal, the inert residue of previous power. “You feel burned out.”

“I’m not surprised,” Elegance said. “It haunts me.”

“Can I try something?” Cole asked.

Mira gave a reassuring nod.

“I suppose,” Elegance said.

Cole began pouring his power into the inert spot. At first it felt like shooting sparks at a dead piece of coal. No fuel remained to burn. As he maintained the pressure, the inert spot began to grow warm.

“I feel something,” Elegance reported, startled.

In the place that had been dead, Cole could now feel a faint glow of power that was not his own. Seizing that glow, Cole increased the intensity of his delivery, pushing with all he had, and the glow flared into a blaze.

Cole released her hand and staggered back. He encountered a sofa and sat down hard.

Elegance looked astonished. “I feel it,” she whispered. “I feel my power.”

“It was so dim,” Cole said. “I don’t think our powers can ever be fully taken. Not completely. But you were about as close to losing yours as it gets.”

“Do you think you can open a wayport now?” Mira asked.

“I . . . I think so,” Elegance said. “It has been so long, but I can see again. See far off.”

“Open a wayport,” Mira urged.

“It will leave me unable to open another if we need it,” Elegance said.

“Not with Cole around,” Mira said.

Elegance looked to Cole.

“It should be fine,” Cole said. “When I woke up people’s power in the echolands, it didn’t go out again. We won’t know unless you try.”

Two wayports appeared on opposite sides of the room.

Elegance smiled faintly. “A waste of energy. This only goes from here to there.”

The wayports vanished.

“I’m still connected to you,” Cole said, feeding her more power.

Elegance raised her eyebrows. “That is amazing. I feel like I could do it again.”

“You could,” Cole said. “Violet opened wayport after wayport with me helping. Just a little while ago she opened three at the same time.”

“No,” Elegance said.

“She did,” Cole assured her. “And she was using them as shields against the Perennial Serpent.”

“If you have an unlimited power supply, why not?” Elegance said. “It must be taxing for you, Cole?”

“Not too bad,” he said.

“Have you found limits?” Elegance asked.

“I feel strained sometimes,” Cole said. “It takes concentration. But I haven’t really found limits. I think I’m getting stronger.”

“Everyone needs rest,” Mira said. “You should sleep, Cole. We all should.”

“Of course,” Elegance said. “You must be exhausted. I’ll have Ethel prepare beds for you.”

\* \* \*

“Good morning,” Mira said brightly, startling Cole out of his sleep. He winced as she pulled the curtains aside, and sunlight streamed into the previously gloomy bedroom. Remembering his circumstances, Cole glanced at his ring and felt relieved to see no signal.

“It’s bright out,” Cole said. “I didn’t mean to sleep so long.”

“I wanted you to sleep as long as possible,” Mira replied. “The Host is waiting at breakfast with the current Grand Shaper of Creon, Kezlyn Vedor.”

“The Grand Shaper?” Cole exclaimed, rolling out of bed. “Why didn’t you get me?”

“She just arrived,” Mira said. “And I am getting you.” She walked out of the room.

Despite receiving pajamas, Cole had slept in his clothes, so he only had to put on his socks and shoes. He had considered keeping his shoes on as well, in case the ring had awoken him with a call to action.

Cole wondered if today would be the day. Maybe Kendo had erred on the side of caution. Maybe Ramarro would not make an appearance until tomorrow.

In a way, it would be nice to have it over with. Suspense could be terrible.

But more time to prepare would also be nice.

Unless the only preparation was worrying.

The prospect of meeting a new Grand Shaper gave him hope. In the past, Grand Shapers had played key roles in their victories.

Cole found Jace waiting with Mira outside the door. They escorted him to a large dining room, where Elegance sat with the Host and a woman in plain Wayminder robes. Cole would have guessed the woman was around fifty, with pleasant features and her hair shaved down to short bristles.

They all stood when the kids entered.

“Cole,” Elegance said. “You know the Host. May I introduce Kezlyn Vedor, Grand Shaper of Creon.”

And then his ring vibrated. Looking down, Cole found it glowing. Mira’s ring glowed as well. And Jace’s.

“It’s time,” Cole said.

“The torivor?” Kezlyn asked.

“Ramarro,” Cole said. “We have to go to the Far North Cache. He’ll be free any minute. We have to stop him.”

A wayport appeared beside Cole as Kezlyn stood. Jace grabbed a muffin and bit into it. Cole figured it wasn’t a bad idea and grabbed one too.

“How long do we have?” Kezlyn asked.

“I’m not sure,” Cole said.

Elegance walked calmly to the wayport. She turned to face the Host. “Will you be joining us?”

The Host offered a faltering smile. “My post is here, protecting this stronghold.” He gestured at Kezlyn. “You are in good hands.”

Cole stepped through the wayport. The air was chilly. Jace, Mira, Elegance, and finally Kezlyn joined him.

They stood just outside a tall metal fence topped with spikes. Beyond the fence, assembled curiosities vied for attention, including slot machines, a Viking longship, a cheap swing set, a wooden lifeguard tower, a pool table, a grass hut, a motor home, a row of trash cans, and a large marble statue. Patches of snow clung to the ground, and frost whitened some surfaces, though enough warmth was creeping into the day that Cole thought it might burn off before long.

“No rampaging monster yet,” Jace said, looking around.

“Can you take us inside?” Mira asked.

“It’s heavily shielded,” Kezlyn said. “I’m sure there are established conduits, but it would take time to feel them out.”

“Cole,” Jace said.

Cole touched Jace’s golden rope and Mira’s Jumping Sword.

“I can help the others over,” Jace said.

“Let me try something,” Cole said, stepping beside Elegance. “Grab hold of me.”

“You’re littler than I am,” Elegance said.

“Just try,” Cole insisted. She put her hands on his shoulders. Cole concentrated on his connection to the Jumping Sword. With his free hand on her wrist, he found his connection to Elegance’s power. Then he tied the Jumping Sword into her as well as himself. He held out the sword. “Away!”

He could feel that the sword required extra energy, so he pushed more power into the weapon as he sprang forward. Elegance rose with him over the fence. He did a little sword-assisted hop as he landed to offset the impact.

“How’d you do that?” Mira shouted.

“He’s got skills,” Jace said as he deposited Kezlyn over the fence using his rope.

Mira jumped the fence with her sword. Jace launched himself over with the rope.

A rumble came from deeper within the cache. The ground vibrated.

“I don’t see Lorenzo,” Mira said.

“I don’t see anybody,” Jace added.

“If he still has the pendant, he’ll end up here,” Cole said.

“Not Lorenzo Debray?” Kezlyn asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “He’s helping us.”

A more serious quake shook the ground, the rumbling becoming thunderous. Again, judging from the sound, the epicenter was farther into the cache. The

tremor subsided.

“Hurry,” Cole said, running toward the heart of the noise.

“What are we going to do when Ramarro comes?” Kezlyn asked.

“Fight him,” Cole said.

“How?” Kezlyn pursued.

“With all we have,” Cole said.

Lesser rumbles came and went. The ground trembled.

“We don’t generally run toward these kinds of sounds,” Jace observed. “Should we hurry?”

Cole gave a nod and drew his Jumping Sword. “Catch up,” he said. Then he pointed it forward and shouted, “Away!”

He bounded through the air, then issued the command again when he landed, then again. Up and down he soared, with Mira just behind him to one side and Jace on the other. The cache was cluttered with diverse items large and small, but it was also orderly, with lanes dividing the collection into a grid. Leaping along the lane, Cole focused on reaching the rumbling, only vaguely aware that he was passing an assortment of refrigerators from different eras, or a roller coaster, or an Asian temple, or a putting green, or an Easter Island moai.

Before long Cole reached an open square. The pendant floated at the center, the sphere glowing an intense white. He stopped jumping forward, and so did the others.

“Where is Lorenzo?” Cole asked, studying the empty area. “Wasn’t he supposed to be getting a bunch of Grand Shapers?”

“Where is anybody?” Jace asked.

With a brilliant flash and a thunderous roar, the pendant shattered. Cole staggered as the ground shook. Returning his gaze to the center of the square, Cole found they were no longer alone.



## CHAPTER

# 26

## RELEASE

A figure stood in the center of the square.

Scary tall.

At least eight feet.

An albino man with long white hair and a lean, powerful physique. A mirthless smile revealed a mouth full of serrated teeth, and his eyes were a blue so pale they were nearly transparent. His lavish robe hung open over a bare chest. Soft moccasins sheathed his feet. He held up a hand, his long fingernails flashing like mirrors.

“Hello, Ramarro,” Cole said. The torivor looked different from how Cole had ever seen him.

“Cole,” Ramarro answered, his penetrating voice audible to the ears but also somehow piercing directly into the mind. “Of course you are here. And two of your friends. And two I don’t know coming along so slowly.” He gnashed his teeth, and suddenly Elegance and Kezlyn stood near Cole. “The Grand Shaper, Kezlyn Vedor. Not even an old one. The incumbent. And Elegance, the eldest princess. This is it? Have you come to surrender?”

“We’re here to stop you,” Cole said.

“I don’t like your weapons,” Ramarro said, waving a hand. The Jumping Swords and the golden rope turned to dust. “This is insulting. And embarrassing.”

The Perennial Serpent appeared off to one side of the square. Beside the huge snake stood a man in a black, cowled robe. He threw back his hood, revealing himself as Owandell. “Welcome, master.”

“Owandell,” Ramarro said. “You brought a pet. You are otherwise alone?”

“I am here to learn your will,” Owandell said.

“You are here unaccompanied in hopes of becoming my mouthpiece,” Ramarro said. “Clumsy and presumptuous. But you can be molded.”

A wayport appeared on the other side of the square. Lorenzo Debray emerged with a pair of other Wayminders.

“Finally,” Ramarro said. “A few of the old guard. But where is Kendo? Ah, he departed at last. A final gesture of cowardice. Very well.” He took a deep breath. “I was held captive for a long time. Uncomfortably long—and I’m eternal. Certain types of suspense do not exist in eternity. Well, as was inevitable, your prisons have failed; your chains have broken; your walls have crumbled. Is this to be a fight or a conversation? Who among you is ready to unconditionally surrender?”

“We hope to reason together,” Lorenzo said.

Ramarro’s smile vanished. “Reason? Now? Where was reason when I was banished to your afterlife? While I was incarcerated, we might have reasoned. A little. To pass the time. Now all that matters is what I want, and who will bow to me.”

“We will not bow,” Lorenzo said.

“We won’t either,” Cole added.

“It’s too foolish to be admirable,” Ramarro said. “Your hearts are only beating because I allow it. I am exercising extreme patience. I am aware that as pathetic as you are, most others are even worse.”

Cole wondered if he could somehow get close enough to touch him.

Ramarro’s smile returned. “Cole, you wish to confront me directly? None have ever so dared.” He motioned for him to approach. “I see your friends believe you may be able to stop me. Shall we lay the matter to rest? By all means, come forward.”

“Let me take care of this pretender,” Owandell said.

“Are you capable of defeating this child?” Ramarro asked.

Owandell paused. “With your help I—”

Ramarro shook his head. “With my sponsorship anyone here could rule the Outskirts unchallenged for a million years. I am not asking what you can do with my help.”

Owandell bowed low. “Please afford me the opportunity to dispatch this foe.”

“You princesses remember Owandell,” Ramarro said. “Was he this courageous when he stripped your powers?”

“We were chained up,” Mira said. “And he had a lot of guards.”

“Elegance,” Ramarro said. “I believe you and certain elements within this serpent were once acquainted.”

“I feel it,” Elegance said.

Cole realized that without the weapons, his power was connected to nothing outside himself. He took a step toward Elegance.

“No, Cole, come to me,” Ramarro said.

Cole faced Ramarro. If the torivor was willing, did this mean he had no chance? Was the torivor playing mind games, trying to disrupt his confidence? Was it possible that Ramarro was underestimating him?

He started walking toward Ramarro.

“Your power is interesting, Cole,” Ramarro said. “Given the chance to mature and develop it, none here but me would be able to threaten you.”

Cole wondered if this would be the end of his life. It seemed probable.

“You interrupted my triumphant return,” Ramarro said. “I had worked my way free and you delayed me. Few could have accomplished it. Such a cheap, cruel trick. The Void was a clever prison. Imperfect, but clever. Dwelling in the midst of nothingness, locked within a repeating moment. Only I could have escaped it. I have half a mind to put you inside as your reward. Let you hover in an endless stasis as your sanity unravels across the eons.”

Cole stopped directly in front of Ramarro, looking up. The torivor was tall and terrifying.

Ramarro held out a hand. “Ready?”

The nails looked sharp, so Cole grabbed his pale wrist.

The jarring influx of power jolted Cole free from all physical sensation. Power was everywhere. It did not present as something separate. It was not contained. Cole struggled to retain his sense of self. The power blazed above him, below him, around him, within him. It was like he no longer existed. Only the power remained.

Choosing his focus at random, Cole reached out blindly to touch the power, to connect, and raw shaping power sizzled through him. He crashed to the ground, dazed and suddenly detached from the flood of power that had engulfed him. He could not move.

“On your feet,” Ramarro ordered. “That was but a glimpse.”

Cole discovered he could move again, but his body felt achy. He rose gingerly.

“Allow me, Great One,” Owandell said. “This urchin is unworthy of your attention.”

“I decide what merits my attention,” Ramarro said. He held out a hand to Cole. “Would you care to try again?”

Cole stared at the white hand, long fingers tipped with silvery talons. What was he supposed to do against so much power? It would be like trying to outwrestle the ocean.

“No,” Cole said.

“A modicum of intelligence,” Ramarro said. “Do you now see the futility of resistance? You have inherited a problem that cannot be solved. I am free. The attempts to contain me have failed. Why perish unnecessarily? Why doom those who stand with you? Submit and survive.”

Cole shook his head. “You offered this before. I might not be able to beat you. But I will not join you.”

Ramarro gazed at him. “Though it makes you more interesting, it is also disappointing. Defiance will not be tolerated. Our interactions are drawing to a close.”

“Wait,” Lorenzo declared. He assumed an awkward stance and closed his eyes. The Wayminders with him struck poses of their own.

“What is this?” Ramarro asked. “Not an attack! A demonstration?”

A large, round wayport opened, the edges swirling like an eddying mist.

“We are the protectors of this world,” Lorenzo declared. “We may lack the might to defeat you in combat, but we can offer you an alternative.” He extended a hand toward the wayport. “This way leads to Earth, a larger, more firmly established world than this one. It has a far greater population and connects to a vast system of worlds and stars and space.”

“No!” Cole cried, staring at Lorenzo in shocked disbelief. “How could you?”

Lorenzo turned a sad gaze his way. “I’m sorry, Cole.”

“I know about Earth,” Ramarro said, stalking over to the wayport.

“Take care, Mighty One,” Owandell advised. “They are deceivers.”

Ramarro stopped at the mouth of the wayport, studying it. “This would indeed convey me to Earth and permit me to remain there. And you hope it will trap me there.”

“We would prefer for the Outskirts to continue as it is,” Lorenzo said.

“And to this end you offer Cole’s home world,” Ramarro said.

Cole was trying to think how he could stop Lorenzo. If he touched him and

disrupted his power, would the Pilgrim Path close? How could he get near enough?

Ramarro considered Cole. "You fear for your world. You do not want me to go." He regarded the wayport again. "There is no great complexity here. I could walk this path whenever I choose." He looked at Lorenzo. "A brilliantly conceived prison in the echolands could not hold me. Do you honestly believe an indifferent planet could?"

"Perhaps it would distract you," Lorenzo said. "Amuse you."

Ramarro waved an arm, and the wayport vanished. "I sense much at play here. I will sort out the specifics later. You weary me. Owandell? Do you still wish to engage Cole?"

"If it pleases you," Owandell said, head bowed.

"It does," Ramarro said. "Do not expect aid from me."

"That will not be required," Owandell assured him.

"Wait," Cole said. "Are you leaving me unarmed?"

"If you believe yourself unarmed, you are far simpler than I expected," Ramarro said. "Owandell. I want Cole defeated. Not killed. Not maimed. Not transported elsewhere. Any of those alternatives would mean you have failed me, with all that entails."

Owandell only hesitated for an instant. "Understood."

Mira appeared at Cole's right. Jace arrived at his left.

Cole was surprised. They didn't have weapons that let them leap there. They must have run.

"If you fight Cole, you fight all of us," Mira said.

"Spare Cole," Ramarro ordered. "Do with the others as you wish."

"Peya," Owandell said. "Get them."

The Perennial Serpent slithered forward, head rearing up, hood spreading wide.

"We don't have weapons," Cole whispered. "Back off."

Mira took Cole's hand. "I'm all we've got."

Cole felt the brightness of her power. Her shaping abilities were mostly untested in combat, but he knew she had a lot of raw strength. Maybe Sambrian shaping could help! He energized her with everything he had.

Mira extended a hand, and the ground rippled in front of the snake. A bulbous section of earth arose and took shape, with a pair of crude arms and a

trio of slender legs. It reminded Cole of a larger version of the mount Mira had tried to create when they were heading to Carthage from Sambria.

“The mudball?” Jace cried incredulously.

Her impromptu creation toddled toward the snake and swung an arm, but Peya dodged the blow and came streaking at Cole and his friends. Cole ran left. Mira and Jace went right. The Perennial Serpent closed on Mira. Jace jumped in front of her when the serpent struck and disappeared.

Cole screamed.

The snake struck again and Mira vanished.

Then the snake wheeled on Cole.

He had no idea what to do. He tried to run as the snake approached, but within a moment it was encircling him, coils constricting. The thick body wrapped around him twice, pinning his arms to his sides and binding his legs together, immovable muscles clenching beneath smooth scales. Cole suspected the snake could crush his bones to dust if it desired.

“Will that suffice?” Owandell asked.

“Do you yield, Cole?” Ramarro asked lazily.

Focusing on the physical contact with the serpent, Cole connected to its power. Peya’s power was impressive, but, unlike Ramarro’s, it was comprehensibly finite. Could Cole attack so much power directly? The nature of the energy reminded him of the power he had reignited in Elegance.

Ribs creaking as he peered across the square, Cole saw Elegance watching. If only he could touch her, he could try to link her power to the snake.

Keeping his connection to the Perennial Serpent, Cole concentrated on Elegance. Her power was there. He could sense it. Cole knew he could hold a connection without touching her. Why not make one?

He had failed before. Many times.

Still, he tried, reaching with his power, searching with his mind.

He had a vague, general sense of her power. But nothing he could actually reach.

Cole remembered the dead center he had accessed when he reenergized her. The expired coal he had saturated until it flared to life.

What about that? Where was that?

Suddenly he was no longer just searching for her power.

He had a more specific target. A target he had not known existed.

He was searching for her center.

The heart of her power.

The core.

And he found it, throbbing in the midst of her power, small but intense. He had never noticed the core before. He had not known to look.

Once found, it seemed more tangible than the rest of her power. If her power was light, this was the lantern. Connecting proved almost effortless.

“This is absurd,” Owandell said. “Yield. Peya does not have to be gentle.”

Peya had sent Twitch away. And Brogan. And Mira. And Jace.

Cole reached into Peya with all he had and heaved her power at Elegance. The transference developed quickly, and suddenly he was not pushing power from the serpent to the princess. It was flowing on its own.

The grip of the snake slackened. And then the serpent began to shrink. Cole felt the power gushing out of the snake as if a dam had burst.

“No!” Owandell cried. “Peya! Attack!”

The spasming serpent offered no reaction. Within moments it lay still, barely a foot in length.

Cole no longer perceived any power in it. He ran toward Owandell.

The robed man looked frightened. “Stay back!” he demanded.

“All right,” Cole said, reaching for him with his power. He had touched Owandell’s power before. The center had to be in there somewhere.

Finding it proved easier than expected.

Knowing what to look for changed everything.

Suddenly Cole was connected.

“So much darkness, Owandell,” Cole said. “Should I brighten it up?”

Mustering all his will, Cole burned away the darkness, untangling the knots and healing the scars. Dropping to his knees, Owandell screamed like he was on fire.

When Cole finished, not much power remained within his foe. But it was untainted.

“Impressive,” Ramarro said. “You learn swiftly, Cole. I believe we have a victor.”

“No,” Owandell moaned, staggering to his feet. “I have served you faithfully. Rebuild me better than before. Empower me, Great One.”

“I will decide your fate later,” Ramarro said, waving a hand.

Owandell vanished.

“You are a problem, Cole,” Ramarro said. “You interest me, and you will not

serve me. What is the answer? Destruction? Incarceration? Torture? Perhaps I could use your friends to persuade you.”

Jace and Mira reappeared.

“Mira!” Cole exclaimed. “Jace!”

“Whoa,” Jace said. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Where were you?” Cole asked.

“Not dead,” Jace said.

“The wilderness,” Mira said. “The middle of nowhere.”

“Not together,” Jace said.

“They were far away and back in time,” Ramarro said. “Simple to retrieve. Equally simple to kill. Cole, serve me or the girl dies. I mean now.”

“Don’t even think about it, Cole,” Mira demanded.

“This is over,” Ramarro said. “Nothing can stop me. Why not confront the inevitable with maturity? What good will be accomplished by losing your friends? By dying?”

“There is still Trillian,” Mira said. “He’ll stop you.”

“Trillian will never have the chance,” Ramarro said. “If you think the founding shapers could build a prison, you have seen nothing yet. Keeping him locked away will be as simple as subduing this absurd little world. Cole?”

Cole’s throat was so dry that he gagged when he tried to swallow. “No,” he finally managed.

Jace stepped in front of Mira. “You have to go through me first.”

“No, I don’t,” Ramarro said as Mira fell to the ground. “But I don’t mind killing you as well. Cole? Want to reconsider?”

“Never,” Cole said.

Jace dropped limply, part of him covering Mira.

“Now, Cole, here is an offer,” Ramarro said. “Last chance. Your world. Serve me and I promise to leave your world alone for as long as you live. Choose death, and I will oblige, but you get no promise.”

Cole glanced numbly at his fallen friends. He had lost them twice now within a few minutes. This felt like the end. Had Ramarro just offered to spare his world? Cole scowled. Could he let that opportunity pass? Wait. No. Ramarro had offered to spare his world for as long as he lived. Under those terms, Ramarro could just kill him and then attack Earth.

“Leave Earth alone forever,” Cole said. “Promise that, and we might have a deal.”



“You are in no position to bargain,” Ramarro seethed. “My offer stands as spoken.”

Maybe none of this was really happening. Did his choice even matter?

“What?” Ramarro asked. “How can this be a hypothetical future? It’s not possible. . . . No, it could be feasible if they were clever enough. Cole, is this a hypothetical . . . ? You don’t know. You’re unsure. Just as you were unsure about the wayport they opened. The Pilgrim Path, as they term it. If this is a trick, you will pay dearly. You will all pay.”

Ramarro turned to face Lorenzo.

“Go!” Lorenzo called.

Wayports appeared all over the square.

Including one beside Cole.

He leaped into it.

CHAPTER  
— 27 —  
NEW COURSE

**I**t took a moment for Cole to absorb where he was.

He had leaped into a wayport.

No confusion there.

But instead of coming out the other side of the wayport, he was inexplicably sitting at a polished metallic table with Jace, Mira, Violet, and Lorenzo in an underground vault. There was no wayport in sight.

The transition was so seamless that it was disconcerting.

He held a flask in his hand. It felt empty.

Lorenzo studied Cole intently. “What did you feel?”

“No way,” Cole said. “I’m back.”

“Back from where?” Jace asked. “You just drank it.”

“No,” Cole said. “I drank it a long time ago. I’ve been busy. You all died. All but Lorenzo. And he was probably about to get killed.”

“You met Ramarro?” Lorenzo asked.

Cole nodded, looking around at his friends, fighting back tears. “I’m so happy to see you.”

Mira leaned over and gave him a hug. He pulled her close and held her tightly.

“I wish I could stop time,” Cole said. “So much is coming.”

“Are you all right?” Lorenzo asked.

“Not really,” Cole said. “None of us are.”

“What did you learn?” Lorenzo asked.

Cole pointed at him. “You opened the Pilgrim Path. Without permission. You invited Ramarro to Earth.”

“He didn’t go?” Lorenzo asked.

Cole shook his head. "I think he sensed it was a trap. But we had a deal! You weren't going to risk Earth unless we were sure."

Lorenzo sighed. "I need to come clean. I was conducting an experiment."

"With the fate of Earth?" Cole asked.

"No," Lorenzo said. "I told you I wasn't sure if the potion worked."

"Yeah," Cole said.

"Torivors read minds," Lorenzo said. "I knew the potion would work. I don't remember what I did in the future you experienced, but I know my plan. There were certain things I needed you to believe in order to conduct my experiment. If you were certain you were in a hypothetical future, Ramarro might have sensed it."

"He sensed I wasn't sure toward the end," Cole said. "He was mad."

"He would have been mad," Lorenzo said. "At that point he suspected we were gathering information. I'm sorry he didn't walk the Pilgrim Path."

"You were checking what would happen," Cole said.

"Our last best chance to check was getting Ramarro to walk the path in the possible future you visited," Lorenzo said. "Had he walked it, I would have collected what information I could and reported to you. But the attempt failed?"

"I don't know what Ramarro sensed," Cole said. "But he knew we were up to something with the Pilgrim Path. I was really worried. I thought you were risking Earth."

"None of that was permanent," Lorenzo said. "No matter what happened, it was going to be erased when you returned to this moment. And now you've returned. So we need a new plan."

"We all died?" Mira asked.

"You and Jace for sure," Cole said. "Jace gave his life for you, by the way. Zero hesitation."

Mira gave Jace a tender stare. "Thank you."

"For failing?" Jace asked. "We died. The goal is to keep you alive!"

"I died too?" Violet asked.

"You maybe died," Cole said. "When we kidnapped the governor."

Jace whistled. "You were busy!"

"You kidnapped Governor Vass?" Lorenzo asked.

"We found out where Owandell is holding the king and queen," Cole said.

"Really?" Mira exclaimed. "Where?"

Cole paused. "Good question. Oh no. I know this. It's some fort in Sambria with lots of Enforcers. An island or something."

"The Island Keep?" Violet asked.

"Yes!" Cole shouted with relief. "Thank you. The Island Keep. I would have felt so stupid if I'd forgotten!"

"I may have teased you a lot," Jace said.

"You don't know if I died?" Violet asked.

"The Perennial Serpent showed up and attacked us as we questioned Vass," Cole said. "It's named Peya. Of course I forget the keep but remember that! The snake got Brogan—"

"We made him young?" Mira asked.

"Yes, and he was awesome," Cole said. "But the serpent bit him, and he vanished, like Twitch. You and Jace got bitten later. You vanished, but Ramarro brought you back."

"Then killed us," Jace said.

"He's a jerk," Cole said.

"Where did we go?" Mira asked.

"You told me you were in the wilderness," Cole said. "Ramarro mentioned you were also back in time."

"So Twitch is probably alive," Mira said.

"Pretty good chance he is alive back in time in the wilderness," Cole said.

"Which means he probably died a long time ago," Jace said.

"Not likely," Lorenzo said. "Unless the serpent found a way to keep him permanently back in time."

"I'm still not clear what happened to me," Violet said.

"I was getting there," Cole said. "When Brogan got bitten, you opened a wayport for us to escape. Jace and I went through, but the wayport closed before you joined us."

"We left her?" Jace asked.

"Not on purpose," Cole said. "Things went bad fast. You were kind of pushy about it, Jace. You wanted to make sure I faced Ramarro."

"Because I'm good in a crisis," Jace said. "Except for getting killed with Mira."

"Maybe I closed it on purpose," Violet said. "To make sure you got away."

"Would you do that?" Jace asked.

"I think so," Violet said. "Or it could have closed if I got killed. Or if the snake tampered with my powers."

“Or Owandell,” Cole said. “He can mess with powers.”

“Owandell was there?” Mira asked.

“I think so,” Cole said. “With Peya. He kept his face covered that time. I think he is the Ancient One. He showed up at the Far North Cache with the same robes when the serpent appeared. We stopped the snake and beat him, by the way, before Ramarro got us.”

“But Mira and I got bitten,” Jace said.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “I stopped the snake, if you want to be specific. With help from Elegance. I connected the serpent’s power to hers, and the rest was automatic. Oh! I can connect without touching now!”

Cole focused on Violet, found her center, and connected to her power. He shared energy with her.

“I feel it,” Violet said.

Cole turned to Lorenzo. “Why didn’t you tell me I just had to reach for the center?”

“The center?” Lorenzo asked.

“Of their power,” Cole said. “The core. To connect.”

Lorenzo gave a little shrug. “You’re teaching me now. I don’t know how to connect to the power of another. I’ve never felt another’s center of power.”

“Well, that’s the trick,” Cole said. “If you can find the center, you can connect.”

“What about Ramarro?” Jace asked. “Can we beat him this time?”

Cole sighed. “I don’t know, guys. It looks bad.”

“Really?” Mira asked.

“He let me touch him so I could try to attack his power,” Cole said. “It was like nothing I’ve ever felt. I had no idea where to begin. His power was everywhere.”

“And we can’t send him to Earth,” Jace said.

“I’m not sure he would go,” Cole said. “And no way can we risk it unless we’re sure it will strip his powers.”

“What else did you learn?” Lorenzo asked. “What should we do?”

“I learned we’re in huge trouble,” Cole said. “We need to take every risk possible if it might help. I learned if we do the same thing we did last time, Ramarro wins.”

“Did Ramarro kill you?” Lorenzo asked.

“Nope,” Cole said. “Last minute you opened a ton of wayports. I entered the

nearest.”

“That was my plan,” Lorenzo said. “A plan I may never actually carry out now. If it turned ugly enough, I was going to use the local conduits to open a bunch of wayports. Hopefully enough to temporarily distract Ramarro. Were other Wayminders with me?”

“Two,” Cole said.

“Probably the two I have in mind,” Lorenzo said. “Grand Shapers. Anyhow, the wayport nearest you led out of Creon. By going through it, you came directly back to this moment.”

“Yes,” Cole said. “I went in. But I didn’t come out. I just showed up here. As if none of it happened.”

“It didn’t happen,” Lorenzo said. “Even though you remember it.”

“With all of you here, it’s like telling about a dream,” Cole said.

“What’s the plan?” Jace asked.

“You and Mira should go to the Iron Fort and give the youth potion to Brogan,” Cole said. “That was a brilliant call. Could you take them, Lorenzo?”

“I can take them to the tent before seeking out my associates,” Lorenzo said. “Where will you be?”

“Last time I couldn’t leave Creon,” Cole said. “I need Violet to help me make some visits. The first is the riskiest. I need to talk to Trillian.”

“Is that wise?” Lorenzo asked.

“For sure it isn’t safe,” Cole said. “But I think it might be necessary. We need all the help we can get to beat Ramarro.”

“Do you think Trillian will betray his own kind?” Mira asked.

“He might,” Cole said. “Mostly because you’re really smart. Something you said in the possible future. Look, I know it’s risky. I know I might not return. But without help I know we lose. Nobody can help us like Trillian can. It’s worth a shot. And time is short. Ramarro shows up tomorrow morning.”

“That soon?” Lorenzo asked.

“Count on it,” Cole said. “The sun was not very high in the sky. Are you up for it, Violet?”

“Why not?” Violet said.

“You won’t remember most of what happened here when you leave Creon,” Lorenzo warned.

“Hopefully when I show up at the Lost Palace, I’ll get the general idea,” Cole said. “Sit tight at the Iron Fort until I get back. I’ll try not to take too long. And

if I don't come back, I'm so sorry. Do you know where we're going, Violet?"  
A wayport opened.

## CHAPTER

# 28

## TORIVOR

The sight of the Lost Palace filled Cole with dread. Despite the moonless night, a greenish radiance glowed from the sickly mist eddying across the uneven grounds, all enclosed by a tall fence fanged with barbed spikes. Sagging walls and spindly towers rose out of the luminous haze like the charred skeleton of a castle. Cole remembered all too well who lived there. Contact with Trillian was strictly forbidden for good reason—he turned visitors into puppets. Many who entered his domain never left. Those who did served the torivor with fanatical devotion. Cole had barely survived his previous encounter.

Cole and Violet stood on the Red Road near a wayport. Though surrounded by wilderness, the perfectly maintained avenue stretched behind them to the limits of sight. Ahead, the gate stood open.

“Are you sure this is where we want to be?” Violet asked.

“No,” Cole said. His memories from before he emerged from the wayport were cloudy.

“I don’t like the open gate,” Violet said. “Feels like a trap.”

“It’s definitely a trap. Nobody should go in there unless they must. But we’re probably here on purpose. We came straight from Creon. You opened the wayport?”

The wayport wavered. “Yes. It’s mine. Are we really so desperate that we’re going to Trillian?”

“We could go back and check, but we won’t remember when we return,” Cole said.

“We’ll remember this moment,” Violet said. “If we come back again, it can be a signal that you really want to talk to Trillian.”

Cole stepped through the wayport, and Violet followed.

They stood inside the metallic vault. It was empty.



Cole remembered his previous experiences—the possible future he had experienced, his return to his friends, and his decision to visit Trillian. And he recalled going to the Lost Palace and feeling completely confused.

“We want to do this,” Cole said, stepping through the wayport. Violet came through as well.

“We’re back,” Cole said. “I guess this means we need Trillian.”

The wayport vanished.

“Should I come in with you?” Violet asked.

“Could you help me teleport out in an emergency?” Cole asked.

Violet held out her hand. Cole took it, connected to her power, and fed her energy.

“It’s heavily shielded,” Violet said. “Like completely. I can’t see anything inside there using my power.”

“Don’t trust your eyes,” Cole said. “Trillian can manipulate reality. It’s hard to tell what is real in there.”

“I’m not sure if a way out is shielded,” Violet said. “Sometimes you can see out of places that block you from looking in.”

“Up to you,” Cole said. “I don’t mind if you wait here.”

“I’ll come,” Violet said, straightening her robes. “I want to see how it goes. Help however I can.”

“Then come on,” Cole said, leading her through the open gate.

The instant Cole passed the gate, the palace transformed. The castle became a gleaming monument to ingenuity and imagination, miraculously crafted out of pearl and platinum, reflecting warm light from the radiant crystals artfully arranged across the stylish grounds. The colors appeared more rich and vibrant than natural limits should permit, as if Cole had worn a dulling filter over his eyes since birth and it had finally been removed. The luxurious red of the road before them reduced all other reds to halfhearted attempts at pink.

“It’s beautiful,” Violet said.

“Bait for the trap,” Cole said.

A woman approached astride a broad, powerful stallion. She had hair like cascades of molten silver and possessed inhumanly flawless beauty.

“Hi, Hina,” Cole said. “We need to see Trillian.”

“We are intrigued by your visit,” Hina said. “Come with me to the palace.”

“It’s an emergency,” Cole said. “The faster the better.”

Hina snapped her fingers, and a pair of saddled horses galloped up to Cole

and Violet. Cole swung up onto the black one. Violet mounted the white.

Cole glanced over at Violet as they rode. She looked nervous and amazed, her hair fluttering in the wind of their speed.

Graceful steps flowed down from the mirrored palace doors. They dismounted at the base of the stairs, and Hina led the ascent. Though there was no hurry evident in her fluid strides, Cole had to jog to keep up.

“We’ll go to sleep,” Cole told Violet. “Trillian will talk to us in a dream.”

Violet held out her hand. Cole took it and energized her power. Violet furrowed her brow and shook her head. “I can’t open a wayport here,” she whispered.

“No need to whisper,” Hina remarked offhandedly. “He hears your thoughts.”

They passed through the mirrored doors into a gleaming white hallway decorated with luminous crystals. Hina led them up a sweeping staircase, then invited Violet into a room.

“Alone?” Violet asked.

“We’ll meet in our dreams,” Cole assured her.

The door closed. A few more steps and Cole received a room of his own. He went straight to the bed and tried to relax. It was not difficult. No beds were this comfortable. Not home, not anywhere.

Soon he stood on a deserted beach, feet buried in the soft, warm sand. A cloud currently hid the sun, but most of the sky was a clear blue. Large waves reared up high before curling and crashing in a foamy tumble. The absence of civilization, together with the tropical air and the ferny shrubs behind him, suggested he might be on an island.

Cole looked around for company. Nobody yet.

He crouched and sifted a handful of fine-grained sand through his fingers. Warm, not hot. Like the air. Ideal. Soothing. Like the bed.

This was a dream.

“More than a dream,” a voice said behind him.

Cole turned to find Trillian where he had not been a moment before. An ageless man whose features hinted at mixed ethnicities, Trillian wore a loose golden robe with fur at the collar and at the ends of the sleeves. Light suffused his skin, as if his insides were glowing.

“Hello,” Cole said.

“I expected you would return,” Trillian said.

“Yeah?” Cole asked.

“If you lived, I knew you would eventually realize you were really fighting Ramarro. I did not believe you would submit to him. And if you wanted a chance to triumph, it would lead you back here.”

“I guess you were right,” Cole said.

“May I have full access to your mind?” Trillian asked.

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not asking for control or even influence,” Trillian said. “Just complete access to your memories.”

“I thought you could read minds,” Cole said.

“I can see more with permission,” Trillian said. “Quicker results. Less guesswork. You’ve been in Creon. Some of your memories are shielded. I can access them for both of us with permission.”

Cole stared as the frothy aftermath of a wave spread flat over the sand. He was here. It was already a huge risk. He might as well get all the help he could. “Go ahead.”

A hand softly touched the back of his neck.

“Ah, yes,” Trillian said. “You have visited a simulation of the future. I see why you came to me. Let me help you recall.”

The events in Creon awoke in Cole’s mind as if they had never left. “I remember now,” Cole said. “No wonder I came here. Ramarro was going to keep you locked up. He admitted it to Mira.”

Trillian stood before Cole and studied him. “I suspected Ramarro would not be faithful to me, given the chance. But knowing is different from suspecting.”

“Different enough to help me?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Trillian said. “I predicted you would become embroiled in the events surrounding Ramarro. I did not realize you would be at the center. And I did not realize you would come to understand your power so rapidly. The events in the echolands accelerated the process.”

“Can I defeat him?” Cole asked.

“In a direct contest? Not with all the aid I could offer.”

“Is there a way?”

“You explored an intriguing possibility.”

“Drawing Ramarro to my world?”

“I believe Lorenzo and Kendo were right,” Trillian said. “I believe a torivor would be rendered powerless if he followed the Pilgrim Path to Earth.”

“Can you be sure?” Cole asked.

“I am nearly convinced already,” Trillian said. “I can see the nature of your world through your memories. I know what happened to Kendo Rattan after he walked the path. I must confess it warms my heart to witness him powerless. After all, he did help imprison me here. His condition suggests that many of the principles of power that function in the Outskirts do not function in your world. Torivors are eternal beings. We are suited to eternal places. Your world is much more firmly rooted in time than the Outskirts. Here, time is more of an imitation. Still, to be absolutely sure I would need to investigate.”

“Could you investigate from here?” Cole asked.

“If Violet lets me borrow her power, I can replicate a Pilgrim Path,” Trillian said. “Now that I understand the possibility, it should not be difficult. The exercise will let me see into your world. I could not walk the path any more than I can leave my castle grounds. I am bound here.”

Cole folded his arms and scrunched his toes in the sand. “You can see my worries.”

“Sometimes I prefer a conversation,” Trillian said.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” Cole said. “I know torivors supposedly can’t lie. What if it’s not true, and if you borrow Violet’s power, you will escape and destroy my entire world? What if you lie about what you see, and Ramarro destroys my world?”

“You want certainty that a torivor cannot lie,” Trillian said. “I understand why. Has anyone ever contradicted this idea?”

“No, people seem to believe it,” Cole said. “But what if you’re waiting for the crucial moment to tell the perfect lie?”

“I can mislead,” Trillian said. “But if I truly lie, my powers will unravel. The control I exert over my surroundings is a reflection of my sincerity. My wholeness of purpose. Torivors are not perfect. If we were perfect, I would work in complete harmony with Ramarro. He is not perfect either. But torivors are unconflicted. He never pledged total loyalty to me, nor I to him. We leave unpleasant matters unresolved. We do not lie about them. We are utterly true to ourselves and to our word.”

“What if you’re lying now?” Cole asked.

“Some examples from your life will help you glimpse the principle,” Trillian said. “In the echolands, you were tempted with the opportunity to go home. Could you have resisted that temptation if you did not sincerely want to save your friends?”

“I don’t think so,” Cole answered.

“When you fell into the slipstream in the echolands, could you have survived if your desire to rescue your friends was false? Could you have resisted the sweeping force of the slipstream and the bountiful summons of the homesong?”

Cole remembered that arduous moment as the slipstream stripped the impurities from his power. He could have let go and zoomed into the beckoning afterlife of the Other. But he still had work to accomplish. Unfinished business. He had needed to save his friends.

“No,” Cole said.

“Heed me, Cole,” Trillian said. “I experienced that moment in your mind as vividly as if I had lived it. If I heard the summons of the homesong as you did under those conditions, I would have advanced into the next world. As a caveat, I am not sure that I would have heard the same music you did. I may not have a separate essence as you do. What I seem to be may be all I am. To die in time could be the true end of a torivor. But if I heard that song calling me onward to a superior eternity . . . I’m not sure what desire would be strong enough to anchor me to this one.”

“You’re saying the slipstream worked like a lie detector,” Cole said.

“Among other things, the slipstream proved the sincerity of your desire to save your friends,” Trillian said. “Insincerity would not have survived the slipstream. And with a torivor, the power that allows us to bend reality to our wills derives from our integrity. Knowing what I know, being who I am, to lie would be to lose the source of my power. To lie is not enticing. There is no urge to resist. In fact, if for some reason I did not care what it would do to me and I wanted to lie with all my heart, I do not believe it would be possible.”

“That explanation is not proof,” Cole said.

“Many things that are real cannot be directly proven,” Trillian said. “Yet there is evidence. And there is reason. Much that cannot be proven can still be discovered and relied upon.”

“But can I risk my world?” Cole asked.

“Search your memories,” Trillian said. “Your world is already at risk. If Wayminders can devise a Pilgrim Path to your world, so can Ramarro. You know this. You watched him figure it out. Ramarro will find the way to Earth with or without your involvement. He would likely subjugate the Outskirts first. Perhaps even reduce it to ashes, depending on his desire for vengeance. But

if luring Ramarro to Earth could undo him, why not attempt it at the start? Why not give the Outskirts a chance?"

"Can you bring Violet here?" Cole asked.

She appeared beside Cole.

"Welcome, Violet," Trillian said. "We have been talking elsewhere, Cole."

"Should I let him use my power to see Earth?" Violet asked.

"Give me a minute," Cole said, walking away a few paces, enjoying the sand against his bare feet.

His situation was desperate. Without help, Ramarro would take over the Outskirts. If Lorenzo had not opened the Pilgrim Path, would Ramarro have discovered it? Certainly not so quickly. Would he eventually discover it? Seemed likely.

Cole took a deep breath of salty air. Did he believe that Trillian could not lie? He did. But if he was wrong, the consequences could be catastrophic.

"You promise you won't enter my world if you use Violet's power to peek at it?" Cole said. "You promise you won't even try to go there?"

"You have my word," Trillian said. "I cannot break it."

"Okay," Cole said. "How does this work?"

"Connect me to Violet's power," Trillian said. "I'm impressed you learned to reach for the nexus. I could have taught you, but you realized on your own."

"The nexus is the center?" Cole asked.

"Yes," Trillian said.

"Can I reach your nexus?" Cole asked.

"I created a nexus in this version of me," Trillian said, placing a hand over his heart. "It will suffice."

Cole connected to Violet with no problem. Finding the center of the power in Trillian was not complicated either. It didn't feel like the immeasurable ocean of power inside Ramarro. It had boundaries.

"Ramarro felt different," Cole said.

"You met Ramarro in person," Trillian said. "This is a limited version of myself, designed to interact with you."

Cole connected Violet to Trillian.

A huge, round wayport opened, the edges hazy.

"I need to send someone through the Pilgrim Path," Trillian said. "Not you or Violet—you would not be able to return. But if a servant connected to my

power goes through, I should be able to feel exactly how going to Earth would affect my power. Any objections?”

“You servant would be stuck there?” Cole asked.

“Cut off from me and from this realm,” Trillian said. “That is the nature of the Pilgrim Path.”

Cole supposed that going to Earth would be better than staying Trillian’s servant. “Do it.”

A man appeared on the beach. He was tall and muscular, with a closely trimmed brown beard that followed his jawline.

“Fenrel, I need you to venture to another world,” Trillian said. “A world without shaping. You will not be able to return. But your adventure will provide information that I need.”

“You are releasing me from your service?” Fenrel asked, unexcited.

“This great and useful deed will end your service to me, yes,” Trillian said. “You will build a new life in a world full of opportunities and conveniences. I trust you will do well.”

Fenrel bowed. “It has been an honor.”

“Farewell, Fenrel,” Trillian said.

Fenrel stepped into the wayport. Unlike other wayports, he did not immediately vanish. He proceeded down it like a tunnel until he faded from view.

Trillian turned to Cole. “We are in what you would consider a dream state. The actual path I opened was on the Red Road. Fenrel’s actual body passed into it there. I have lost all contact with him, but not before I got the briefest of glimpses. Your world would utterly strip a torivor of his powers. My only question is whether a torivor would survive.”

“You’re sure?” Cole asked.

The Pilgrim Path closed.

“Ramarro would be rendered powerless by going to Earth,” Trillian said. “As would I. No doubt.”

Cole let the connections to Violet and Trillian drop. He watched a curl progress along a breaking wave. “So there’s a chance. Last time he didn’t want to go.”

“Too many people present were hoping for him to go,” Trillian said. “Lorenzo and his colleagues wanted it. And though you were conflicted, you also knew Ramarro might be rendered powerless. He sensed the trap.”

“And now I know for sure that the path will strip his powers,” Cole said. “He’ll see it in my mind. Besides, if you can figure out Ramarro would lose his powers, so can he.”

“Perhaps he could be persuaded otherwise,” Trillian said.

“How?” Cole asked.

“You must understand your foe,” Trillian said. “In our native realm, torivors are held in check by one another. We have rulers, but no dictators. Ramarro left home to explore. And to rule.”

“You had the same reasons?” Cole asked.

“More or less,” Trillian said. “Ramarro views himself as superior to all life he has encountered beyond our home realm. He wants to bend everyone he encounters to his will. If you bow to him, you become largely irrelevant, invisible. He is intrigued by those who defy him.”

“I defied him,” Cole said.

“I’m aware,” Trillian said. “Torivors can read minds. But we cannot see all. Memories are hard to reach unless they are on the main stage of the mind. Your present thoughts are the most vulnerable. We can perceive those as if you are speaking them to us. We will sometimes ask questions to bring thoughts to the foreground. We can deduce and assume much from only a little information. There are patterns.”

“I have to try not to think about it?” Cole asked.

“Do not think of a large red lion,” Trillian suggested.

“It’s all I’m thinking about,” Cole said.

“You will not succeed in hiding your thoughts about the Pilgrim Path,” Trillian said. “Not on your own.”

“You can help?” Cole asked.

“With your permission,” Trillian said. “I can hide some memories. I can create new realities in your mind. You will believe them. And I expect Ramarro will too.”

“Why do you need my permission?” Cole asked.

“Your will is sovereign,” Trillian said. “Your will belongs to you. Others can complicate your circumstances and reduce your options. You can be tricked, abused, intimidated, jailed, and enslaved. But your will, your core self, what you know, who you choose to be, your identity, is yours alone. It can be influenced. It can be surrendered. But not taken.”

“What would you make me believe?” Cole asked.



“You would believe that the Pilgrim Path was a temporary opportunity,” Trillian said. “Only an option for a very limited time. You would feel sure that the Wayminders wanted to sacrifice Earth to save the Outskirts. And you would believe you had proof that access to Earth would simply allow Ramarro to rule both worlds. You would think you had proof the Wayminders were utterly mistaken in their hopes. It would feel real to you. It would be extremely frightening. And it might mislead Ramarro.”

“Wouldn’t that be lying?” Cole asked.

“I would help you believe what you tell me you want to believe,” Trillian said. “That is not lying. That is executing instructions with permission. Any lies would come from you.”

“It could mislead Ramarro,” Cole said.

“I mislead frequently,” Trillian said. “But I mean every word I say.”

“Are you misleading me now?” Cole asked.

“You don’t know all of my motives,” Trillian said. “But I am telling you the truth.”

“Won’t Ramarro see other things in other minds?” Cole asked.

“We would need to adjust Violet’s mind as well,” Trillian said. “The other minds have no certainty. They will appear conflicted. Ramarro would have to see very deeply very quickly. Think of him surrounded by many books. He has the ability to read them, but not the time and perhaps not the desire. He has abundant confidence. The things you believe will shout at him, while other minds are uncertain. It could work.”

“And if it fails?” Cole asked.

“You will miss your best opportunity for victory,” Trillian said. “At least it grants an opportunity.”

“You want to see him fail?” Cole asked.

“It simplifies matters for me,” Trillian said. “He would be my only real rival if I ever get free. I knew I did not have his loyalty. After viewing your memories, I know he considers me an enemy. He would kill me if he could.”

“But you came here together,” Cole said.

“Without ever having dwelled in time,” Trillian said. “Without ever risking death. Without ever having weaker beings to dominate. The relationship quickly became complicated and unstable. We had no time for it to play out before we were imprisoned.”

“You could have dominated your children,” Violet said. “Back home. If you

needed to rule somebody.”

“No, Violet,” Trillian said. “Torivors are eternal. We never began. There are no children in our home realm.”

“How can you never begin?” Cole asked.

“Time has beginnings and endings,” Trillian said. “Eternity either exists or it doesn’t. Only that which is eternal truly exists. You exist. This state is temporary, but your essence is eternal.”

“Isn’t this temporary for you?” Cole asked.

“I am eternal,” Trillian said. “I never had to worry about death. However, when I entered a realm vulnerable to time, I entered a temporary state. My time in the Outskirts began, meaning it will also end. Entering time also made me vulnerable to death. If I die, having come here as an eternal being, will I go elsewhere? This is untested. Unknown. I may be risking not just a temporary life, but my entire existence. Ramarro too. It awakens new insecurities. Confuses relationships. Especially when we were not willing to vow to protect each other. We discovered we both wanted to rule.”

“You’re dangerous,” Cole said.

“You knew that before we met,” Trillian said. “I would have offered to help defeat Ramarro in combat if you freed me from my prison. But you know I’m dangerous. And I would have made no promises not to rule. I have time on my side. I am capable of patience. So why waste time with a fruitless conversation? I influence where I can. If you remove Ramarro, you solve a perplexing problem for me.”

“And if he won’t take the Pilgrim Path?” Cole asked.

“Seek help from all your allies,” Trillian said. “Ramarro and I were captured once. It took a group effort. Ramarro will be much more prepared this time. But who knows? Perhaps with enough of the right people involved you could put up a fight.”

“Okay,” Cole said. “What happens if I let you mess with my mind? Can you change me?”

“Any alteration to your essence can only be accomplished with your full permission,” Trillian said. “I can’t change you against your will. I can make changes we agree upon. Especially to your memories and your understanding. But that should not happen yet. It would be better for you to remember the reality of the situation as you prepare. Come visit me again shortly before Ramarro will appear, if you like my strategy.”

“I will,” Cole said. “It’s the best I’ve heard.”

“We can go?” Violet asked timidly.

“You have a busy night ahead,” Trillian said. “I wish you well.”

## CHAPTER

# 29

## RESCUE

**T**hat could have been worse,” Violet said after they exited the palace grounds through the barbed fence.

“If Trillian didn’t want to use us against Ramarro, it would have gone much worse,” Cole said.

“Mira got Ramarro to confess he would keep Trillian in prison?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “I remember it all now. Having those memories will help.”

“I remember Creon, too. I hope all of my memories are real.”

“I don’t think he can plant fake ones unless we let him.”

“I hope you’re right. Where to next?”

“The Island Keep?” Cole asked. “Save the queen and Mira’s sisters? Maybe even the king.”

“Just the two of us?” Violet asked.

“Owandell swiped them with Wayminders,” Cole said. “Why not rescue them the same way?”

“You are a tempter,” Violet said. “I have already broken some serious rules as a Wayminder. There is no exception where sneaking into anywhere is acceptable. Not in times of war. Not in emergencies. That includes into a private residence. You are talking about an Enforcer fortress.”

“You caved easier for Brogan,” Cole said. “You took us to the balcony outside the governor’s room to kidnap him.”

“I did?” Violet asked.

“Without much hesitation,” Cole said. “Except we can’t use Brogan for this. If he leaves Creon, he’ll get old again.”

“They’re probably shielded,” Violet said. “It may not be a quick in and out. Won’t we want Jace?”

“We’re always safer with Jace around,” Cole said. “But getting Jace will take time. We can’t go straight into the Iron Fort, or leave straight from it. Let’s just investigate. Maybe all we need is a wayport to the right room.”

“Which is why it is so illegal,” Violet said.

“Owandell did it to take the king, the queen, and two princesses,” Cole said. “He went right into the First Castle and snatched them. We can’t use the same method to take them back? We’re trying to save the world. Even if this destroys the reputation of Wayminders forever, isn’t it better than having all Wayminders destroyed forever?”

Violet’s eyes widened with realization. “I’ll do it,” she said. “Give me a lot of power. I’m going to spy like no Wayminder has spied before.”

She reached for Cole’s hand, but he waved her away. “I remember how to connect directly.”

“All right.”

Cole found her nexus and flooded power into her.

Violet closed her eyes. “I’m there. I see it. I don’t sense much shielding. I’m too used to Creon. Nobody who broke into the Island Keep from Creon could leave. Unless you were with them, Cole. Only you could help someone open a wayport in Sambria.”

“If a wayport opened from Creon to Sambria, couldn’t they just leave it open and go back through it?”

“Wayports from Creon to another kingdom do not allow for travel in both directions,” Violet said. “Only from Creon to the desired destination.”

“Then we have a big advantage,” Cole said.

Violet looked at Cole. “If the queen is really at the Island Keep, she must be well out of sight. They can’t afford her being discovered. These are Enforcers. At least some would be more loyal to the crown than to Owandell if he abducted their monarch. Until Ramarro reorders the world, Owandell needs to keep this crime quiet. So I need to look in the deepest, most private corners of the dungeon, or else up high in tower cells. With royalty, probably towers. Owandell would want to show respect for the office, and towers would be the most removed from the rest of the fortress. Unless he has some other secret room someplace.”

A small wayport opened in front of Violet, no larger than a dinner plate. She leaned close, peering through. Glancing at Cole, she held a finger to her lips. The wayport closed. Another opened.

As they stood on the Red Road, borrowing light from the Lost Palace, Violet opened and closed several small wayports—some as tiny as a coin. Light or sound issued from some. Cole caught fragments of conversation as he kept feeding her power.

After closing the latest little wayport, Violet turned to Cole. “Lots of guards at the base of the second-highest tower. It’s full of really sturdy doors, and features a guardroom halfway up with Enforcers inside. Nobody in the third-highest room. Nobody in the second-highest room. And I haven’t looked into the top room. It is protected. If I open a wayport there, an alarm will sound.”

“Do you have to open a wayport?” Cole asked. “Can’t you just look with your mind?”

Violet shook her head. “I can get the lay of the land that way. The shape and position of buildings. But I don’t really see. Not like I can with my eyes. And I don’t sense living things like people.”

“There could be guards inside,” Cole said.

“If it goes bad, we could back out and close the wayport,” Violet said. “But they might move the prisoners before we can try again.”

Cole drew his Jumping Sword. “We can take them, especially if Honor is there. I’ll energize her. How many doors to the room?”

“One,” Violet said.

“With Brogan, you opened wayports to block doors,” Cole said. “Used them defensively.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Violet said. “With your help, I bet I could open multiple wayports all at once. How many could I handle?”

“I’m pretty sure you did three at once when we took the governor,” Cole said. “You blocked a door. You also blocked one of the wayports they opened.”

Violet nodded. “Okay. You want to try right now?”

“I think we should,” Cole said. “Time is working against us tonight.”

“It’s late,” Violet said. “They might be asleep.”

“Let’s find out,” Cole said, energizing her power.

A wayport opened.

“Go,” Violet said.

Cole stepped through. He was in a semicircular room. Iron shutters masked the windows. Honor and Harmony sat at a table conversing by lamplight. Stafford rested on one of four narrow beds. Destiny slept on another. There were no guards.

“Hurry,” Cole said as Violet stepped through the wayport. “Let’s go.”

He ran to Tessa and started helping her out of bed. She rubbed her eyes as she sat up. Harmony and Honor joined him.

A key rattled in the door.

A moment later, a wayport blocked the door.

Leaving Destiny with her mother and sister, Cole crossed to Stafford. Looking weary and drawn, the old king shook his head. “I’m in no condition to travel. Leave me.”

“We can help you,” Cole insisted. “It isn’t far. We’ll use wayports.”

Coughing heavily, Stafford shook his head. “I am still High King of the Outskirts. Do as I command. Leave me. See my wife and children to safety.”

Cole still felt conflicted leaving the old man behind, but then Harmony called from over by the wayport. “Come, Cole.” Honor and Destiny had already gone through.

Cole retreated to the wayport as Harmony passed through. He glanced back at Stafford, who waved him away. Cole entered and Violet followed. The wayport closed, leaving Stafford behind. But thankfully everyone else was safely rescued.

“The Red Road?” Honor asked. “Why are we at the Lost Palace?”

Cole understood the edge of hysteria in her voice. She had been held captive here for a long time. “Because we are fighting a torivor in the morning,” Cole said.

“Not Trillian,” Honor said.

“No, Ramarro,” Cole clarified. “And we need all the help we can get.”

Honor eyed the Lost Palace uncomfortably. “Do not trust any aid from Trillian.”

“He has reasons to help us,” Cole said. “I’ve glimpsed our future. Without help we fail.”

“How did you find us?” Harmony asked.

“Long story,” Cole replied. “We’ll explain later.”

“We will face Ramarro in the morning?” Honor asked. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Cole said. “I shouldn’t share too much. Some of our plans need to stay secret. Ramarro can read minds.”

“What should we do?” Harmony asked.

“I was hoping Tessa could give us a clue,” Cole said.

“Her power doesn’t work on demand,” Honor said. “We could go to

Necronum and see.”

“Maybe if I share power with her here?” Cole asked.

“You can try,” Destiny said. “I want to help.”

Cole reached out for the nexus of her ability. Although he could sense her power, the center eluded him. He could not connect.

Turning his attention to Honor, he found her center of power swiftly. Harmony as well. The queen gave him a chiding stare as he connected to her nexus.

“I can connect without touching now,” Cole said, turning his attention back to Destiny. “Usually.”

“My power can be elusive,” Tessa said. “Owandell had a hard time with me when he stole it.”

Cole took her hand and found he could connect that way. Her power billowed and folded like smoke buffeted by wind from all directions. Even with direct physical contact he could not find the center. He infused the roiling mist of her power with energy.

Tessa gave a small whimper. Her arm trembled in his grasp. She stared at the sky, eyes unnaturally wide. “No,” she whispered.

Harmony braced her daughter. “Are you all right?”

Tessa was shaking her head. “A wave,” she said, her dispassionate voice incongruent with her quivering frame. “A great and terrible wave of darkness will swallow us. Eternal night. An end to hope.”

“Can we fight it?” Harmony asked.

“Where do you hide from a shadow bigger than the world?” Tessa asked. “Can we fight the night? Can we outrun darkness? The wave looms over all, growing as it consumes, engulfing everything.”

Tessa’s head snapped toward Cole, her eyes dizzily focusing on him. “Find Dandalus,” she whispered.

Then she went limp.

Cole stopped feeding Tessa power and helped Harmony lay her down on the road. She stirred slightly.

“That was enormous,” Honor said.

“The big visions really deplete her,” Harmony said. “That one must have been pressing on her, waiting for an opportunity to manifest.”

“Didn’t sound good,” Cole said.

“Can you find Dandalus?” Harmony asked.



Cole shrugged. "Maybe. I left him in the echolands. He was going to find a new place to hide. I'm not sure where to look. Even with weeks, or months, I might never find him."

"Those were the only hopeful words she spoke," Honor said. "If you're going to ask Tessa, you listen and follow through."

"What about Jenna?" Violet asked.

Cole gave a nod. "I have a friend at a temple in Necronum. I need to go there anyway to see if I can find Hunter and Dalton before the big fight. Maybe I can try to cross over to the echolands briefly. It would have to be quick."

"Should we get moving?" Honor asked.

Violet studied Cole expectantly.

"We'll take you three to the Iron Fort," Cole said. "You can join up with Mira and Elegance. But we won't come in yet. Violet and I have an appointment in Necronum."

## CHAPTER

# 30

## REUNITED

Cole and Violet stepped quietly from the wayport into the silver sanctum. They were coming from the tent outside the Iron Fort, where they had left Harmony, Honor, and Destiny. Cole had convinced Violet that it would be better to open a wayport directly into the Temple of the Still Water than to try to talk their way past the guard. He was not sure how broadly word was out that he was wanted as a possible murderer of the king.

“What happens when breaking the fundamental laws of your order becomes routine?” Violet whispered.

“It all depends how it goes,” Cole whispered back. “You’ll probably end up somewhere between a medal of honor and the death penalty.”

“It’s quiet,” Violet said. “How are we going to find her?”

“I really don’t know,” Cole said. “We never went to her bedroom. And Jenna is free now. She could be in a totally different area.”

“Maybe we should talk louder,” Violet said with more volume.

“Get found?” Cole asked.

“Or we can roam and look for somebody still awake,” Violet said.

“What if they ask how we got in?” Cole asked, returning to a whisper.

“If we act like we belong, they might not ask,” Violet said. “If they do, stay vague—pretend we’ve been here awhile.”

“I’m so thirsty,” Cole said loudly, crossing to a carafe of water and filling a glass, making sure to clink them together. He set the carafe down noisily.

“That might be a little much,” Violet said more quietly.

“Best water around,” Cole said loud enough to make Violet cringe. “Nice and still.”

“I thought I heard someone,” a female voice remarked from across the room.

Cole turned to find an older woman entering the room. He recalled her from his previous visit, but her name slipped his mind.

“Good evening, Gilda,” Violet said warmly.

“Yes,” Gilda said. “I remember you two. Isn’t it rather late to be up and about?”

“We have an urgent matter for Jenna,” Cole said, “or we wouldn’t have come by so late.”

“We don’t know her room,” Violet added.

“She’s not officially under my watch anymore,” Gilda said. “She is now a free woman. But she still carries in the same quarters. You feel sure she is expecting you?”

“We have news she has been waiting for,” Cole assured her.

“Let me fetch her,” Gilda said. “Make yourselves comfortable.”

Gilda walked away.

“The water is nice and still?” Violet whispered. “At the Temple of the Still Water?”

“Just making conversation,” Cole whispered back, pouring more water.

They waited in silence.

“I hope she wants to see us,” Cole finally said.

“Maybe she’s sleepy,” Violet replied.

“What if Gilda called the guards?” Cole whispered. “How fast can you open a wayport?”

“Fast enough,” Violet said.

Cole and Violet strolled around the sanctum as they waited, staying close together. At length they heard footsteps coming.

Jenna entered the room, along with Dalton and Hunter.

“Yes!” Cole cried, his voice too loud in the silence. He rushed over to Dalton and gave him a hug, then hugged his big brother. Jenna embraced him as well.

Violet hung back.

“You guys waited for me!” Cole said. “Good job!”

“Just following instructions,” Hunter said. “Who is this?”

Cole found Violet staring at Hunter with undisguised interest. Making her attraction even more obvious, she blushed and tried to look elsewhere, but kept glancing back at him.

“This is Violet, the best Wayminder around,” Cole said. “She’s our ticket to anywhere we want to go. Violet, this is my best friend, Dalton, and my brother,

Hunter.”

Beaming from the praise, Violet held out a hand to Hunter. “Nice to meet you. I didn’t know Cole’s brother would . . . look like you do.”

Cole had never seen Violet so delighted to meet someone.

“I went and got them after Gilda woke me,” Jenna said. “They were in the guest rooms.”

“I’m glad you’re all here,” Cole said.

“We were so worried about you,” Dalton said.

“It’s been crazy,” Cole said. “I can activate anybody’s power now. I don’t even have to touch you.”

“How about all five powers at once?” Hunter asked.

“You have all five shaping abilities?” Violet asked, as if it sounded much too good to be true.

“I’m proficient in all the disciplines,” Hunter said.

“Let’s see,” Cole said, focusing on Hunter and finding the center of his bright, multifaceted power. Cole connected and shared energy.

“I feel it,” Hunter said. He picked up a nearby glass and changed it into a sword. Then he set it down and transformed into a tiger. A wayport appeared. Then he returned to normal, and the wayport vanished.

“Incredible,” Hunter said. “Where were you for every fight I’ve ever had?”

“Cole is why I can take us anywhere,” Violet said. “Maybe you can too.”

“Probably, if he provides the power,” Hunter said.

“And I could reach the dead from outside Necronum,” Jenna said, looking as beautiful as ever, dark curls tumbling over her silver robe.

“Oh no,” Dalton said. “Granny Helki.”

Jenna swatted him. “Granny is darling. But I had someone else in mind. Cole, I had a special visitor not long after you left last time.”

“Who?” Cole asked.

“You didn’t tell us,” Hunter complained.

“I was supposed to wait to tell Cole directly,” Jenna said. “It’s sensitive information.”

Cole wondered who would have reached out from the echolands. “Harvan?”

“His name was Dandalus,” Jenna said.

Chills tingled down Cole’s back. “Really? He wasn’t in hiding?”

“He thought you might be surprised,” Jenna said. “He knows you’re going to fight Ramarro. He knows where you will be. He promised to be there too. But

in order for that to happen, you have to bring me and empower me.”

“Sure,” Cole said. “Did he mention it might be the end of the world?”

“If it is, we might as well have good seats,” Jenna said.

Cole grinned. “That’s one of the bravest things I’ve ever heard. It’s going to be bad.”

“Dandalus made that clear,” Jenna said. “I already decided.”

“Destiny Pemberton told me to find Dandalus,” Cole said. “It must be important.”

“He already found me,” Jenna said.

“I would have come here with or without Destiny’s help,” Cole said. “Dandalus needed to reach me. He bet I would come to you. Can he fight?”

“He can’t fight as if he were part of the physical world,” Jenna said. “But I know he means to help.”

“It must be crucial,” Cole said. “Destiny is never wrong.”

“What do you know about Ramarro?” Hunter asked.

“He’ll break free tomorrow morning,” Cole said.

“This coming morning?” Dalton asked.

“It’s going to be terrible,” Cole said. “I sort of got a peek at the future. He is incredibly powerful. We have a chance. It might be a long shot.”

“We knew it would be bad,” Hunter said. “Is there no way to keep him locked up? Or to transfer him to another prison?”

“I’ve talked with some of the Grand Shapers of Creon,” Cole said, “including Kendo Rattan and Lorenzo Debray. I don’t think we can stop him from getting loose.”

Hunter rubbed his mouth. “I’m not sure this could be worse. You really think we have a chance?”

“Ramarro can read minds,” Cole said. “I shouldn’t say too much. But we do have a chance. And if we win . . . I found a way home.”

“Wayminders can go to our world,” Hunter said. “But nobody can stay permanently.”

Cole shook his head. “Kendo Rattan found a way. He did it himself. It’s called the Pilgrim Path. It lets you go to Earth permanently. But you lose all connection to the Outskirts. After long enough, Kendo began to think he had imagined his life here.”

Jenna, Dalton, and Hunter stared at him. Jenna gasped and turned, wiping at her eyes. Hunter looked slightly dazed. A giggle escaped Dalton.

“Really?” Hunter asked. “An actual way home?”

“I’ve seen it with my own eyes,” Cole said.

“Could we take off before Ramarro gets free?” Dalton asked. He glanced at Violet. “No offense.”

“I understand,” Violet said.

“If we can find Lorenzo, you, Hunter, and Jenna could maybe go home,” Cole said. “But I have to stay.”

“You *have* to?” Dalton asked.

“I’m the best chance against Ramarro,” Cole said. “I won’t leave here until we deal with him.”

“What if the best chance against Ramarro is still terrible odds?” Hunter said. “Don’t forget, home is Mom, Dad, our house, our neighborhood, our world, our future—everything we lost.”

“I know,” Cole said.

“This ship is sinking,” Hunter said. “You don’t have to go down with it. Defeating Ramarro is not realistic. If the ship will sink either way, we might as well get off. All of us who can.”

Cole nodded. “But what if we can stop it from sinking? What if only I can stop it?”

“There is no way to know,” Hunter said.

“The only way to know is by staying,” Cole said.

Hunter stood with his hands on his hips. “You get how dangerous it will be. Last time you met Ramarro he was in a weakened state. He is way beyond anything we’ve faced.”

“I know,” Cole said. He thought about how easily Ramarro had bested them in the theoretical future. “Believe me.” What if he failed just as quickly again? What if they couldn’t trick Ramarro into going to Earth and becoming powerless? What if Cole made a pointless sacrifice? What if he led his brother and Dalton and Jenna to meaningless deaths? Part of Cole desperately wanted to let Hunter take the lead. In some ways, it would be such a relief to run away. To go home. Maybe he would eventually forget the world he had surrendered, the friends he had abandoned. “I just can’t.”

“Are you sure?” Hunter pressed. “This isn’t a game. At best Ramarro will kill us. At worst he could torture us. Maybe forever.”

“I might be able to stop him,” Cole said. “Kendo Rattan thinks I have the best chance of saving the Outskirts. Dandalus seems to think I have a chance too. We

have a plan that could work. It has to stay secret, but it could work, and I can't leave if there's a real chance. I can't leave Mira. I can't leave Jace, or the princesses, or the queen, or any of the others."

"Bring them," Hunter said. "Bring everybody we can. Mira. Jace. Violet. They can start over on Earth. Might be tough, but it beats getting destroyed by Ramarro. Or becoming his slave."

"What about everybody else?" Cole asked. "This is a big place."

"It's not your job to save them," Hunter said. "We don't even belong here. We were kidnapped. We've been used, Cole. I've been used. I wasn't like you. I didn't come with a group. I was nabbed alone. I thought I was stuck here. I thought there was no way home. So I did my best to get by. I followed the orders they gave me. I trained. I used my powers, became an Enforcer. I was brought here against my will. You were trying to stop a kidnapping. They just wanted us as slaves. Do we really owe them our lives? For a lost cause? Why not go home if we can?"

"Some bad people brought us here," Cole said. "But you know there are good people here too. Just like anywhere. Good and bad. If there is a chance I can save the five kingdoms, I have to try."

"Even when the odds are astronomically terrible?" Hunter asked. "If I thought we had a real chance, I might feel differently. I've seen my share of fights here. This one looks like a sure loss. Why risk it?"

"Because I can't leave this world knowing I might have saved it," Cole said. "I just can't. I'm not scared of dying anymore. Don't get me wrong, I'm not in a hurry, but it doesn't terrify me. We're all going to die. What matters is how we die. And how we live. Leaving when I could have helped—that would kill me more than dying. It just would. Somebody has to fight the hard fights. There are times when somebody else can't do it. Or won't do it. So it's you or nobody. I've had a chance to go home before. And I'm not going anywhere unless I stop Ramarro."

Hunter stared at his brother. "Now *that* might be the bravest thing I've ever heard."

"You guys can go," Cole said. "You guys *should* go. I'm not sure having you there would make much difference."

"Hey, I'm proficient in all five shaping disciplines," Hunter said.

"And you know who we're fighting," Cole replied.

Hunter nodded. "I'm not leaving my little brother. No way. If you're going

down, I'll be with you."

"I won't leave either," Dalton said.

Jenna patted Cole on the shoulder. "We'll all do our parts."

"You might not get a chance to leave," Violet said. "We'd need to find Lorenzo. We don't know where he is."

"I know where he'll be in the morning," Cole said.

"That's not good enough," Violet said. "He's central to the plan. We have to find him. He needs to know his part."

Cole thought about that. Unless Lorenzo knew opening the Pilgrim Path to Earth was safe, he might not do it. After his next visit to Trillian, Cole would sincerely believe that letting Ramarro take the Pilgrim Path would destroy the Earth, and Lorenzo might believe his concerns unless he knew the plan. But if Lorenzo knew that the Pilgrim Path would strip Ramarro of his powers, Ramarro might read his mind and learn the truth.

"You're right," Cole said. "We need to find Lorenzo."

"If we take your friends to the Iron Fort, we can start searching Lorenzo's hideouts," Violet said.

Cole gave a nod and rubbed his hands together. He looked at Jenna, Hunter, and Dalton. "Ready to save the world?"



## CHAPTER

# 31

## PREPARATIONS

When Cole arrived at Elegance's quarters inside the Iron Fort, he found Lorenzo waiting. Brogan was already a young adult and dressed for battle. Jace, Mira, and Elegance looked ready for a fight as well. Harmony stood near Elegance, like an older version of the same woman. Honor and Destiny sat in a corner playing cards.

"Look who finally decided to join the catastrophe," Jace said.

"We were searching for you guys the whole time," Dalton complained. "And we were getting chased by Enforcers."

"And sometimes we were chasing them," Hunter said.

"Meanwhile we fought Elegance's power," Jace said.

"What is it?" Hunter asked.

"The Perennial Serpent," Jace said.

"Really?" Hunter asked. "But it has been around ever since—right, time travel."

"Are you absolutely sure it's my power?" Elegance asked.

"I'm positive," Cole said. "The snake will be there when Ramarro returns. If you're with us, Elegance, that part should be an easy fight."

"Then I'll be there," she said.

"And me with her," Brogan added.

"I need to talk to Lorenzo alone," Cole said.

"Ethel," Elegance called. "Please show Cole and Master Debray to a private salon."

Ethel promptly entered and escorted Cole and Lorenzo to a small room. Once inside, Cole closed the door.

"What have you learned?" Lorenzo asked.

“Going to my world will destroy Ramarro’s power,” Cole said. “Trillian confirmed.”

“Excellent,” Lorenzo said, pounding a fist into his palm. “That gives us an opportunity.”

“You can open the Pilgrim Path without me?” Cole asked.

“I can with the help of two other Grand Shapers,” Lorenzo said. “I already recruited them as backup. But why without you?”

“Ramarro can read minds,” Cole said. “Right before the fight, I need to go to Trillian and have him program my mind to believe I have sure knowledge that the Pilgrim Path will enable Ramarro to control both worlds. And that the opportunity to take the path may not last very long.”

“Brilliant,” Lorenzo said. “That could work.”

“Except now you know that taking the path will destroy him,” Cole said.

“I have some ability at screening my thoughts from scrutiny,” Lorenzo said.

“We can’t risk it,” Cole said. “Everything depends on this. We should hint to the others that the path is not an option, so they will have that belief. Tomorrow, you come with me to Trillian and let him program you to think Earth is such a tempting world to invade that it will distract Ramarro from the Outskirts. And maybe with a faint hope you can seal him there or something.”

“I am very reluctant to open my mind to Trillian,” Lorenzo said.

“Does that matter?” Cole asked. “We need to save the Outskirts. This could do it. We can make Trillian promise to only change what we want changed in our minds, right?”

“Assuming he will agree,” Lorenzo said.

“He already agreed for me,” Cole said. “We almost certainly lose without this. Isn’t a real chance to defeat Ramarro worth the risk?”

Lorenzo nodded. “I suppose you’re right. You already saw us fail. This is your choice?”

“I think it’s our only hope,” Cole said.

Lorenzo gave another nod. “Very well.”

Cole and Lorenzo returned to the room where the others waited. Lorenzo cleared his throat, and the room fell silent.

“Cole has learned that opening the Pilgrim Path to Ramarro would probably give the torivor control of Earth,” Lorenzo announced. “Little would prevent him from returning here and promptly ruling both worlds. We must do our best

to fight him as soon as he appears. Perhaps with Cole enhancing all of our abilities, we can catch him off guard.”

“I’ll do my best,” Cole said. “When Ramarro first shows up, I suspect he will destroy our weapons. If we have decoy weapons, but hide the best ones, maybe we can use the good ones in a fight.”

“Use a Wayminder,” Brogan suggested. “Set the weapons you wish to preserve in a handy location far from the confrontation. Then open a wayport to them when we want them.”

The thought had not occurred to Cole. “Perfect. We should sleep. Ramarro will get loose in the morning. I have one last thing to do with Violet around sunrise. Then we should get in place at the Far North Cache.”

\* \* \*

Violet shook Cole awake the next morning. “The sun will rise soon,” she told him.

Cole rolled off the bed, clothes and shoes already on. It felt like he had slept about ten seconds. “Where is Lorenzo?” Cole asked.

“Just outside,” Violet said.

Cole and Violet found Lorenzo waiting with a guard. Lorenzo made a gesture, and the guard opened a wayport. They all stepped through to the desert sand near the striped tent.

Color leaked into the sky above the horizon, drizzling the distant dunes with variegated highlights. Cole wondered if this might be the last sunrise he would ever witness. Glancing over at the statue of the Perennial Serpent, he pointed at it. “Whatever else happens, you’re finished today.”

“We should hurry,” Violet said.

Cole connected to her power, and she opened a wayport. They stepped through onto the Red Road in front of the gate to the Lost Palace.

Lorenzo gasped. “I never dreamed I would tread here.”

“We’re all awake,” Cole said, leading the way forward. “Like it or not.”

After crossing the gate, Cole found Hina waiting, wearing a gown that glimmered like starlight. There were no horses or other guards, but five canopies stood nearby that had not been there before. Each sheltered an inviting bed.

“It’s all so different inside,” Lorenzo said.

“Welcome,” Hina greeted. “We understand you have need of haste. Please choose a place to lie down.” She indicated the canopies.

“He visits in a dream,” Cole said. “Go to sleep.”

He trotted over to a canopy, walked across an embroidered rug, and sank onto a decadent mattress. Cole worried that, with the urgency of the day, he might have a tough time settling down. Those cares soon dissolved, and his eyelids drooped.

Cole was back home in his bedroom—his bedspread, his books, his jeans on the floor, one pant leg inside out. A cup of water sat within reach on a paper towel. He picked it up and took a sip. He could faintly hear a television in another room.

He went to the window and peered out. The morning sun was too high for a school day. Saturday, maybe?

“Are you ready?” Trillian asked from behind him.

“Is this supposed to relax me?” Cole asked, waving a hand at his room.

“Perhaps,” Trillian said.

“Or make me homesick?”

“Perhaps.”

“Or show me what I can have if I win?”

“There could be many reasons,” Trillian said.

Cole glanced toward the hall. “Are my parents here?”

“They could be,” Trillian said. “It would consume time. And it would not be entirely real. We can talk anywhere you wish.”

“The beach was good,” Cole said.

With no perceptible shift, they were back on the beach. Sizable waves crashed before them. Lukewarm sand greeted Cole’s bare feet.

“You enjoyed the beach in Miami,” Trillian said. “I prefer more tranquility.”

“It’s great,” Cole said. “Where are the others?”

Violet and Lorenzo appeared.

“I was orienting Master Debray,” Trillian said.

“You will only affect my mind so I believe I can send Ramarro to Earth on the Pilgrim Path to distract him from our world,” Lorenzo clarified.

“I will leave some hope that taking the path could render him powerless,” Trillian said. “I will color it as a vain hope. I think that hope is necessary. I do not believe you could bring yourself to simply give Earth to Ramarro, no matter how I tamper with you.”

“And you will do nothing else to my mind,” Lorenzo said.

“I cannot alter who you are without explicit permission,” Trillian said. “Even then there are limits. I can’t tamper with your mind in ways you do not allow. Furthermore, I promise to all of you that I will not even attempt to alter your minds beyond how we explicitly discuss.”

“That will have to suffice,” Lorenzo said. “All right.”

“I will think the Pilgrim Path is a direct route to the conquest of Earth for Ramarro,” Violet checked.

“Yes,” Trillian said. “If you care for my opinion, I should adjust Lorenzo first. Cole should keep connected to Lorenzo so he can leave the Lost Palace and open a wayport to meet the other Wayminders who will help him open the Pilgrim Path.”

“Can I stay connected to him when he leaves the Lost Palace?” Cole asked.

“If he stays on the Red Road, I believe so,” Trillian said.

“Very well,” Lorenzo said.

“Connect to his nexus, Cole,” Trillian instructed.

Cole did so easily.

The torivor touched the back of Lorenzo’s neck, and he vanished. Even with Lorenzo gone, Cole’s connection to him persisted.

“The transition is smoother if the subject awakens with the false knowledge,” Trillian said. “Violet next?”

She nodded. Trillian touched the back of her neck, and she vanished as well.

A large wave roared. Cole wondered if there was something he was not seeing. Some trick Trillian could be playing.

“You’re wise to be cautious,” Trillian said. “But our interests align here. I would love for you to defeat Ramarro. Be sure to listen to Dandalus as well. He is no fool—he reached out to you for a reason.”

“Okay,” Cole said.

“Lorenzo is on the road,” Trillian said.

Cole could still feel the connection. He fed power to Lorenzo. And then the connection broke.

“He departed through a wayport,” Trillian said. “Are you ready?”

“What if the trick doesn’t work?” Cole asked. “What if Ramarro doesn’t take the bait?”

“You will have a difficult fight on your hands,” Trillian said. “Empower your friends. Listen to Dandalus.”

“Can you do anything to help me?” Cole asked.

“Any other help I could provide might one day endanger me,” Trillian said. “And I will not risk harm to help you. I have been harmed enough in this world.”

“All right,” Cole said. “Do it.”

He felt a hand on the back of his neck.

CHAPTER  
— 32 —  
**SHOWDOWN**

Cole opened his eyes.

He was on a bed. An unbelievably comfortable bed.

Fabric overhead. He was beneath a silken canopy.

No breeze.

Where was he?

Trillian! The canopies all shaded beds!

He was awake! Today was the morning Ramarro would attack.

And then he remembered.

Going to Earth would not strip Ramarro of his powers. The torivor could end up ruling both worlds if he walked the Pilgrim Path! But there was a chance that if they could delay him long enough, some of the Grand Shapers of Creon could take away the opportunity of following the Pilgrim Path.

Cole shivered. He and his friends had no other option but to fight. Hopefully, they could distract Ramarro long enough to give Earth a chance.

No.

They had to do better.

Hopefully, they could defeat Ramarro. No matter how powerful the torivor was, there was always a chance. Maybe if Cole empowered all of his friends, together they could catch Ramarro off-balance and bring him down.

His friends! They needed to know about the Pilgrim Path.

Wait.

They were already working under the assumption the path wouldn't work. He had just been here to confirm their suspicions. And to see if Trillian had any extra tips.

There were no tips.

They were on their own.

Cole rolled out of bed. He needed to get back to the Iron Fort.

He found Violet coming toward him.

“The Pilgrim Path won’t work,” she said.

“I know,” Cole replied. “It will just give Ramarro another world to rule. We have to stop him on our own.”

“Can we?” Violet asked.

“We have to try,” Cole replied.

“But can we win?”

Cole squared his shoulders. “Only one way to find out. Come on.”

Violet followed him out the gate to the Red Road. He connected to her power, energized her, and she opened a wayport. Cole stepped through to the sand.

A guard greeted them and brought them to Elegance’s quarters. Cole found Elegance, Harmony, Honor, Destiny, Mira, Jace, Dalton, Hunter, and Jenna all seated around a long table enjoying breakfast. The Grand Shaper Kezlyn Vedor was present as well. Ethel and a pair of servants kept food coming and glasses filled.

“Did you sleep in?” Jace asked around the pastry he was eating.

“We just got back,” Cole said.

“He knows you did,” Dalton said. “How’d it go?”

“Not the best,” Cole said. “I got confirmation that we can’t rely on the Pilgrim Path. If Ramarro uses it, he’ll just add Earth to his conquests. Where is Brogan?”

“He went ahead with a couple of handpicked guards from here to prep the battleground,” Elegance said. “And this is the Grand Shaper Kezlyn Vedor. She has come out of hiding to aid us.”

“Thanks,” Cole said, his mind racing. Having guards from the Iron Fort would be different from last time. Having Brogan would be different too. Last time had been a failure. Differences were encouraging. “What about Lorenzo?”

“We haven’t seen him this morning,” Mira reported. “Want some food?”

“I’m not really hungry,” Cole said. “I’d feel better getting to the Far North Cache.”

“The rings are quiet,” Mira said.

And last time they had cut it kind of close. It would be smart to help Brogan prep the battleground, using his knowledge from the fight in the hypothetical future. But he didn’t want to bring up the possible outcome he had already



experienced. Not everyone knew about it. "Might be smart to get there early. Be ready. Who is coming?"

"All of us but Destiny," Harmony said.

"I want to come," Destiny complained.

"We have been over this, Tessa," Harmony said. "Your power has no applications in combat."

"Unless you need to know something," Tessa said. "Like how to stop Ramarro."

"You're too young," Harmony said. "It would disturb me too much. End of subject."

"I can give you some power now," Cole said. "See if your power activates again."

"Yes, please," Tessa said.

Cole moved around the table to her, and she offered her hand. He took it and fed energy into her.

After a long moment, he quit and released her.

"Sorry," Tessa said. "I was trying."

"It never works when you're trying," Mira muttered.

"I was trying last time," Tessa said. "And it worked just fine."

"Eat one of these," Jace said, approaching Cole from behind. He handed him a piece of wheat toast with egg on it. "Everyone deserves a last meal."

"You're going to curse us!" Mira griped.

"I'm trying to help him die bravely," Jace shot back.

Cole took a bite of the toast. It tasted good.

Harmony stood, dabbing her lips with a napkin. "Let's gather our things. Remember your decoys. We need to leave your best weapons where Brogan instructed."

As most of the diners left the table, Cole sat down by Jenna to finish his egg on toast. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm nervous," Jenna said. "I've never been in a fight before."

"This will be a strange fight," Cole said. "It could be over so quickly."

"Well, I could visit some of my friends in the echolands," Jenna said. "I feel bad I didn't say good-bye to Granny Helki."

"We might survive," Cole said, then took a big bite of toast. He set the rest down. "Come on."

The others gathered, then a guard opened a wayport and they went to the

sand. Three tables were set up. Some of the group put their special weapons on one table, some on another. Cole went to set his Jumping Sword beside Mira's, but she waved him away.

"Brogan thought you should leave your Jumping Sword on the third table," Mira said. "It's just for you. And Violet could open the wayport for you."

"Sure," Violet said, standing nearby.

Cole set down the Jumping Sword, and his ring started glowing. Mira handed him a short sword. "A decoy for Ramarro to destroy," she explained.

"Time to go," Jace said, holding up a hand to display his shining ring.

"We're still ahead of schedule," Cole muttered to Violet, connecting to her power.

A wayport opened.

"Far North," Violet announced.

Harmony led the procession. Cole watched the others file through, and then went second to last. Violet came after.

He recognized the fence around the cache. Violet had chosen a different point along the perimeter than Elegance had selected.

That reminded Cole.

"Elegance," he said. "I need to wake up your power. It's important."

"All right," she responded.

Cole found the dead ember at her center and flooded it with energy until it blazed to life. When finished, he kept the connection.

Elegance gazed at Cole in astonishment. "How did you do that?"

"It's part of my ability," Cole said.

Violet gestured at another wayport. "This will take us to the middle of the cache, where Lorenzo expects Ramarro to appear."

Cole had almost forgotten that Lorenzo had taught Violet how to use the conduits at the cache. He went through first this time.

Cole emerged at the square in the center of the cache where he had faced Ramarro before. The pendant already hovered in the middle of the square, shedding white radiance.

"Greetings, Cole," Brogan welcomed him. "Beautiful day to save the world, am I right?"

Cole smiled. As the others came through, the ground began to tremble. Violet stepped from the wayport, and it closed.

The rumbling increased in volume, and the ground quaked harder. The

pendant glowed more intensely. Cole staggered along with the others. Dalton sat down, and soon everyone followed his example.

Cole found himself between Violet and Jenna. He focused on connecting to the powers of those around him. He had Elegance and Violet already. He connected to Honor. Then Jenna. Then Mira. Then Harmony. Then Dalton.

Cole realized he had never connected to a weapon like the Jumping Sword or golden rope without touching it. Would weapons have a center like a person? Hopefully. Right now, no shaped weapons were present, so it was too late to experiment.

With a brilliant flash and a thunderous roar, the pendant shattered. Ramarro appeared—a tall, robed albino with a grin like a shark. He looked just as Cole remembered.

The rumbling had ceased. The ground was still.

Cole stood up. His friends followed his lead.

“You got out,” Cole said.

“It was only a matter of time,” Ramarro said. “Cole, of course you are here. You brought a little entourage.” He gnashed his teeth. “The Grand Shaper. Kezlyn Vedor. Not even an old one. The incumbent. And Queen Harmony. Elegance, the eldest princess. Her sisters Miracle and Honor. A few others of lesser consequence. This is it? Have you come to surrender?”

“We’re going to stop you,” Cole said.

“I don’t like your weapons,” Ramarro said, waving a hand. The weapons Cole and his comrades held dissolved into dust. “This is insulting. And embarrassing.”

The Perennial Serpent appeared off to one side of the square. Beside the huge snake stood a man in a black, cowed robe. He threw back his hood, revealing himself as Owandell. “Welcome, master.”

“Owandell,” Ramarro said. “You brought a pet. You are alone?”

“I am here to learn your will,” Owandell said.

After a moment of effort, Cole connected to the nexus of the Perennial Serpent. He linked the power to Elegance and started a torrential flow. Tail swishing, head flailing, the serpent began to shrink.

“What has he done to Peya?” Owandell shouted. “Stop him!”

“I prefer servants who can defend themselves,” Ramarro said.

“Sword,” Cole muttered to Violet.

A wayport opened beside him. Reaching through, Cole grabbed the Jumping Sword off the table in the desert. He energized it and flooded the weapon with

power.

The hilt was growing warm as Cole overloaded the sword with energy. He pointed it at Owandell and at the last moment tried something new—he disconnected the weapon from the attachment to his body.

“Away!” Cole shouted, releasing the weapon.

The sword flew from his hand faster than an arrow from a bow, streaked through the air, and plunged into Owandell’s chest so deep that the hilt disappeared. After staggering back, Owandell stood still for a moment, naked astonishment apparent. He dropped to his knees and extended a shaky hand toward Ramarro.

The Perennial Serpent had shrunk down to barely a foot in length. Ramarro strode forward and crushed its head.

Owandell fell forward, flat on his face, the blade of the Jumping Sword protruding from his back. A hand twitched, and then he became still.

“That was remarkably efficient,” Ramarro said to Cole.

“Thanks,” Cole said. “I’ve never used the Jumping Sword that way before.”

A wayport appeared on the other side of the square. Lorenzo Debray emerged with a pair of other Wayminders.

“Finally,” Ramarro said. “A few of the old guard. But where is Kendo? I see. He departed at last. A final gesture of cowardice. Very well.” He took a deep breath. “I was held captive for a long time. Uncomfortably long—and I’m eternal. Certain types of suspense do not exist in eternity. Well, as was inevitable, your prisons have failed; your chains have broken; your walls have crumbled. Is this to be a fight or a conversation? Who among you is ready to unconditionally surrender?”

“We bring another option,” Lorenzo said. He assumed an awkward stance and closed his eyes. The Wayminders with him struck poses of their own.

“What is this?” Ramarro asked. “Ah, not an attack. A demonstration?”

A large, round wayport opened, the edges swirling.

“We are the protectors of this world,” Lorenzo declared. “We may lack the power to defeat you in combat. But we can offer you an alternative.” He extended a hand toward the wayport. “This way leads to Earth, a larger, more firmly established world than ours. It has a far greater population and connects to a vast system of worlds and stars and space.”

“No!” Cole cried, unable to believe what he was seeing and hearing. How could Lorenzo betray an entire world? Didn’t he know the strategy was flawed?

Ramarro would now dominate two worlds instead of one!

Cole reached for Lorenzo's center and found it.

And then the connection was severed.

"Leave him be," Ramarro said. "These Wayminders are under my protection."

Ramarro stalked over to the wayport. "The Pilgrim Path," the torivor said, looking down the misty corridor.

Cole desperately reached out for Ramarro, trying to connect to his power, hunting for a center.

"Would you like to contend directly with me?" Ramarro asked, extending a hand toward Cole.

Cole stared. He remembered what it had been like to connect to Ramarro before. There had to be some other way.

Ramarro scowled. "You have done this before. Faced me before. Lived this moment before." He stared intently at Cole. "When? How?"

Cole tried unsuccessfully not to think about it.

"A hypothetical future," Ramarro said. "You had time to prepare for our present encounter." He turned to the wayport. "And this is all suspiciously convenient."

Ramarro stared intently at Lorenzo. Then at Cole. Then at Violet.

"Her too," Ramarro said.

"What?" Cole asked.

"Trillian," Ramarro said, his voice very calm. "Your memories are not genuine, Cole. Would you like the real ones back?"

Suddenly Cole remembered the whole plan. The Pilgrim Path would leave Ramarro powerless if he walked it. Trillian had planted other thoughts to trick Ramarro.

"Oh no," Cole said, realizing their best chance had been thwarted.

"Want your memories, Lorenzo?" Ramarro asked. "Violet? You may as well join us in reality. Can we revisit the opportunity to surrender? I will offer each of you who kneel to me prominent positions in my service."

"None of us will kneel," Cole said.

One of the guards from the Iron Fort dropped to one knee.

"He's not really with us," Cole clarified.

"You cannot stand against me," Ramarro said. "It is a challenge to adequately express your doom. You are little more than figments of my imagination."

"If you're so powerful, bring back Twitch," Cole said. In their hypothetical

encounter, Ramarro had retrieved Jace and Mira from where the Perennial Serpent had sent them. He wondered if Ramarro could track down his friend who had been lost for a longer time.

“It would be a simple matter of tracing the history of Elegance’s power,” Ramarro said. He stared at Elegance for a moment.

Jenna stepped up beside Cole and whispered, “I need extra power.”

Cole funneled a larger share of energy into her. He could feel her using what he sent, so he pushed harder.

Twitch appeared a few paces in front of Cole. His clothes were dirtier than when Cole had last seen him. He looked bewildered until he met eyes with Cole.

“I’m back,” Twitch said.

“There is little I cannot do,” Ramarro said. “I could kill him quicker than you can blink.”

“Oh no,” Twitch muttered. “Is that . . . ?”

“Ramarro,” Cole supplied.

“Do not be confused,” Ramarro said. “This is not really a fight. I could destroy everyone here more easily than taking a step. Your battle against me ended the moment I got free.”

“Why not destroy us?” Cole asked.

“Destroying this world would be satisfying,” Ramarro said. “Ruling it will be more interesting. You are currently alive because I would prefer interesting subjects to dull ones. But my rule will be absolute. All who will not serve me must perish.”

Dandalus appeared beside Violet, not far from Cole, looking almost alive, his form only slightly transparent. “I wondered if I would live to see this day,” Dandalus said.

“You didn’t,” Ramarro replied.

“And yet here I am,” Dandalus said.

“An echo,” Ramarro said. “I am glad you are here to witness this.”

Dandalus held up both hands toward Ramarro, then leaned down and whispered something to Violet. Cole made sure she had plenty of power.

“Secrets are impolite,” Ramarro said, an edge of impatience in his voice.

“Listening in is even less polite,” Dandalus said, walking over to Cole. He leaned close and whispered, “Go through the waypoint Violet opens. Trust me. You must get away.”

“I grow impatient,” Ramarro warned. “Don’t tempt me, Dandalus, or I will

place your echo into a nightmare stasis where—”

“Try it,” Dandalus said.

A wayport opened in front of Cole.

“Go, Cole,” Dandalus urged.

Ramarro reached toward Cole, and sparks erupted in the air, spreading out across the surface of an invisible wall. Dandalus grunted and trembled. “Go.”

“Don’t you dare—” Ramarro began.

Cole heard no more, because he sprang forward through the wayport.

## CHAPTER

# 33

## COLE

Cole stood in the deserted courtyard of a castle.

He knew this courtyard!

He knew this castle!

“SURVIVE THE TRIAL TO OBTAIN THE REWARD,” an enormous voice declared, emanating from the castle itself.

The wayport closed behind him.

All his connections to the others were cut. He had been feeding power so steadily to so many people that the loss felt incredibly abrupt. What would they do without him? He had just stranded most of his favorite people with an angry torivor.

And now he stood alone, drifting on a sentient sky castle, with the Eastern Cloudwall looming not too far away. He had no way off the castle unless a skycraft happened by. Or unless Violet or another Wayminder chose to visit.

He hoped Dandalus had a plan.

Statues great and small began to emerge from the walls of the courtyard. Some surfaced out of the ground. All converged toward him.

Reaching out, Cole could feel them. Drawing on his power, with an effort of will, he blasted the nearest figures into gravel.

“Stop,” Cole ordered. “I’m Cole. This castle was made for me.”

The statues came to a halt. All signs of animation departed.

“I haven’t been here before,” Cole continued. “I went to one just like it. I guess these castles keep appearing?”

Perhaps ten paces away, Ramarro materialized.

“Peculiar destination,” the torivor said. “Why flee here? This exhibition of derelict castles did not exist when I first came to the Outskirts. I have heard of



it since. Never visited. Did Dandalus think you would escape me here? Did he expect me to follow? It makes sense for us to converse alone.”

“Does it?” Cole asked.

“You could save your friends,” Ramarro said. “They follow your lead. If you ask them to die, they will. To what end? I will govern the Outskirts with or without your help. If you live, you can advocate on behalf of those I rule. Dead, you can do nothing. This is your last chance. No more stalling. No place left to run. You can order your friends to die. Or you can spare them. It all depends on you.”

“I won’t kill them,” Cole said. “You will.”

Ramarro shrugged. “You could stop it. Or not. I am losing interest.”

“I’m never going to serve you,” Cole said. “Neither will they.”

“That keeps it simple,” Ramarro said. “Should I just let you drift to oblivion on this castle? I can keep an eye on it, make sure nobody comes or goes. Would you prefer the suspense of a few more minutes? The illusion of hope? Or how about a clean death? Quick and painless. Perhaps I could lock you in the Void. I escaped it. You would not. Should I store you there? Let you hover in an endless stasis as your sanity unravels across the eons?”

Cole looked at the motionless statues spaced around the courtyard. Some had frozen while still separating from the ground or the walls.

“Don’t be a fool,” Ramarro said.

“Get him!” Cole shouted. In unison, the stone figures charged Ramarro. More issued from the walls and ground. Bearded warriors raced alongside graceful ballerinas—Cole recognized several of them from his previous visit to the similar sky castle.

Ramarro waved a casual hand at the nearest statues. They wobbled but kept coming. He held a hand up as if commanding them to halt. Those directly before him slowed. The others continued toward him at their normal pace.

A statue of Dandalus rose up from the ground beside Cole. “This is your battleground, Cole,” the statue said hurriedly, his voice low. “This is the one place you might defeat the torivor. The elements of this island were designed to resist his commands and to follow yours. The island will try to hold him here. It’s no sure thing, but perhaps it gives you a chance. Do not let him escape. If you don’t win here, you will fail.”

Ramarro was now engaging the statues in physical combat. With fluid grace, he moved as if the fight had been choreographed to showcase his excellence. He

dodged every attack, disarming opponents and then using their weapons against them. Ruthlessly efficient, he moved much quicker than an ordinary mortal could have managed. With each statue dodged, shoved aside, or destroyed, Ramarro worked his way toward Cole.

“Contain him!” the Dandalus statue cried. “Protect Cole! The enemy is in our midst!”

Walls shot up around Ramarro, shielding him from view. A large slab of stone erupted from the ground and landed atop the walls, forming the top of a huge stone box.

*Was this your plan?* Ramarro asked, the words searing into Cole’s mind. *Lure me into one last trap? None of his traps ever killed me, Cole. And his prisons all failed to hold me. This pathetic trick planned from beyond his grave will soon crumble. If I lay still, nothing here could begin to hurt me. I see that everything here was designed to attack and resist me. And it will. Until I retune it. Until I create it anew. Get ready, Cole. You’re about to learn what happens when you choose the wrong allies.*

The front of the stone box exploded outward. Several stone fragments whistling toward Cole turned to dust before reaching him. Ramarro raced from the box, hurling statues aside. More walls sprang up around him, trapping him in another stone box, but it only held for a moment before all the walls exploded outward. Once again, the debris streaking toward Cole evaporated.

Slamming statues out of his way, Ramarro charged forward. Cole was backing up, but Ramarro would soon reach him. Reaching out with his power, Cole grabbed the statues surrounding Ramarro and thrust them at him from all directions. Many of the statues shattered as they collided with Ramarro and crashed into one another. The brutal impact made the torivor stagger.

“Maximum effort!” the Dandalus statue called.

The ground shifted beneath Cole as the entire castle accelerated toward the Eastern Cloudwall. Statues emerged from the walls and ground more rapidly. Other statues merged to form larger ones. Soon none were smaller than Ramarro. Many were bigger. And they were fast. Almost as fast as him.

As Cole kept backing away, he realized that if the castle had attacked him and his friends like this, they would not have lasted more than a few seconds. But though Ramarro was fighting harder, he showed no vulnerability. The occasional weapon that struck him broke apart. And he continued to destroy or dodge statues despite the increased tempo of the brawl.

*You will pay for this,* Ramarro vowed directly to Cole’s mind. *No clean death for*

*you. I will wring agony from you for ages.*

Cole took some consolation from the threats. Ramarro was struggling. Though scary, the threats were also evidence of frustration.

Cole bashed more statues together around Ramarro. The material of the statues felt eager to comply. Those statues shattered by the impact promptly reformed and kept attacking. Ramarro was slowed by the press, and Cole continued to retreat.

The cloudwall filled the sky ahead of the castle, approaching rapidly. As he considered the increased pace of the sky castle, Cole realized the plan.

The vortex within the cloudwall.

*Vortex?* The word penetrated his thoughts. *What vortex?*

Cole tried not to think of the gigantic vortex behind the cloudwall, and so of course he pictured it vividly. Peering into the whirling maelstrom was like gazing down into a tornado with a mouth as wide as a football stadium. He remembered how the howling experience inside the slipstream in the echolands had reminded him of the violent funnel. Like a cosmic drain, the vortex devoured the endless parade of sky castles flowing into it.

Maybe it could devour a torivor.

*How exactly is the vortex like the slipstream?* Ramarro asked.

Cole had fallen into the vortex, and he had fallen into a slipstream. In the vortex, he had his physical body. In the slipstream, he was an echo. Still, they sounded similar, felt similar. The silvery material inside seemed somewhere between a liquid and a gas. Cole could remember it rushing around him. The homesong had been loud and clear in the slipstream. Almost irresistible. Had he heard it in the vortex? Not that he recalled.

Cole tried to think about flamingos. He pictured Dalton cannonballing into a swimming pool. He envisioned a guy playing the piano.

He tried not to think about vortexes and slipstreams.

He kept failing.

*Let's take this fight elsewhere,* Ramarro spoke to his mind.

Nothing changed. Statues kept attacking Ramarro.

Yes, Ramarro thought. *I see. It is difficult to open a wayport here. Even for me. The intent is to hold me here. You are wrong about the vortex. Wrong about this castle. Nothing in this flimsy realm can contain me.*

“That prison in the echolands held for a long time,” Cole muttered.

Ramarro roared. Damaged statues went flying.

Cole heaved a flood of statues at Ramarro from one direction, forcing him back and to one side. Though fighting hard against the tide of stone figures, Ramarro was losing ground. More statues emerged. Cole kept hurling them.

*I prefer to fight on my own terms,* Ramarro conveyed harshly.

Leaping high into the air, Ramarro transformed into a huge eagle and began flying upward. Atop the castle and the surrounding walls, statues slung stones, launched arrows, and hurled javelins. The eagle swerved adroitly. The few projectiles that connected did no visible damage.

Ramarro gained altitude.

He was escaping.

Cole focused on one of the largest statues, a thick-limbed giant with enormous hands. Cole connected with his power and hastily levitated the giant toward the eagle. The giant caught up, but the eagle expertly steered away from the outstretched hands again and again.

Then the eagle seemed to smack against an invisible ceiling. After losing some altitude, the eagle rose again, only to bump once more against an unseen barrier. After the second impact, Cole guided the giant close, and it got hold of a wing.

Cole let the giant fall. The eagle came with it. As the statue and the eagle plummeted, the bird transformed into the robed albino. The impact with the ground blasted the statue to pieces, but Ramarro arose unruffled. Cole wondered if anything could harm him.

*I chose an incredibly durable form,* Ramarro spoke to his mind.

As other statues converged on Ramarro, Cole focused on one of the towers of the castle. Connecting to it, Cole hurled it down at Ramarro. The avalanche of beams and stone blocks arrived even as statues swarmed the torivor. Billowing dust plumes gusted outward from the tumultuous rubble.

Cole connected to as much of the island as he could mentally embrace and heaved it toward the cloudwall. The pace only increased slightly.

Battered blocks of stone shifted, and Ramarro climbed from the wreckage. Statues continued to attack him.

Vehement words entered Cole's mind like a physical blow. *You will not hold me here!*

Ramarro pointed at Cole and connected to him. Suddenly Cole was submerged in the vast ocean of Ramarro's power. He could not feel or hear or

see. He could barely think. The power was all around him, trying to force a way into him. With all of his might, he held it off.

What could he do now? He had not sought this connection and had no idea how to break it. He had reached out to connect to others on many occasions. This time Ramarro was holding him.

Holding him.

Although overwhelming power enveloped Cole, the aggressive power sustaining the connection came from a specific source. Cole desperately focused all of his attention in that direction, and the connection from Ramarro began to feel like a lifeline in a storm-tossed sea. As power surged around him, Cole clung to the connection and traced it back to a blazing nexus.

There was no time for planning. Cole attacked the nexus, determined to rend it apart. The effort proved too great, like trying to pick up an ocean liner while swimming beside it. He began trying to crush it, but the surface felt too dense, as if he were trying to pummel his way into a bank vault with his fists.

Ramarro's power closed in around him, constricting, intensifying. Cole knew that no matter how fiercely he resisted, it would soon overwhelm him. He would be consumed. Ramarro would escape. His friends would die. The world would perish.

But it had not happened yet. This was his only chance. Ignoring the hostile power encroaching from every side, Cole stopped trying to damage the nexus and instead reached into it. The effort was excruciating, but as he pushed with all he had, he felt beneath the surface. Having established that contact, Cole drew upon his hopes, his fears, and his ardent desire to survive, and hit the nexus with everything he had, tearing and shredding with the frantic energy of desperation.

Explosive shock waves quaked through the power around him.

Sharpening his focus like a blade, like a drill, Cole reached deeper into the damaged nexus and savaged it again. Everything around him roared in agony.

The power suddenly withdrew.

Cole stood again in the courtyard, his faculties restored.

Down on one knee, head bowed, Ramarro clutched his chest. Then he looked up, fury in his gaze.

*Impossible!* The word struck Cole's mind like an explosion.

"Come get more!" Cole yelled, though he could hardly stand.

Fog washed over Cole and Ramarro as the castle entered the cloudwall. The

ground lurched, and the speed of the forward motion increased. Cole fell onto his side. He could no longer see Ramarro.

*You will die too,* Ramarro conveyed.

“I don’t care,” Cole cried.

*Dandalus sent you to your death,* Ramarro said.

“At least he gave me a chance to die bravely!” Cole yelled.

Ramarro connected to Cole again. Power washed over Cole, but he immediately followed the connection to the nexus, drove inward, and hit it with everything he had.

Ramarro’s power recoiled from Cole. The connection broke. Thick mist gushed across the courtyard as the castle bucked and plunged. Cole sailed into the air as the ground fell away, then smashed against it when it returned.

*I’m leaving,* Ramarro declared. *This construct cannot resist my full concentration. Die alone.*

Ramarro ducked his head and clenched his fists.

The statue of Dandalus cried out, “Can’t . . . hold . . . him!”

Ramarro was about to open a wayport. Or just teleport. He was using his power to dismantle the trap holding him here. At any moment he would vanish. Cole balled his hands into fists.

Ramarro was right. No trap Dandalus had fashioned had ever managed to destroy him.

But this time was different. Ramarro was not alone in this trap.

Cole reached out to Ramarro’s power. Connecting to that ocean of shaping prowess, Cole searched the vastness for the blazing nexus he had touched twice before. The area was staggering, but Cole remembered what the nexus had felt like, and as he stretched out with his mental faculties, he caught traces, hints, and followed them.

Until he found it.

Bracing himself as if he were about to use his bare hands to scoop hot coals from a fire, Cole reached deep into the nexus and started twisting and kneading and ripping. Fireworks erupted in his mind, but he held on and kept tearing.

At last he could take no more, and the connection broke.

Ramarro lay sprawled on his face. The torivor looked up, head swaying unsteadily.

*How dare you!*

“Want more?” Cole yelled.

*This will not destroy me, Ramarro warned. You will pay. This whole world will pay.*

“You’re wrong!” Cole yelled.

*Even if this leads to the slipstream, I will be fine, Ramarro conveyed. You survived it. I saw it in your memories. I will escape without a problem.*

“Are you sure?” Cole asked. “I belong in time.”

Great fissures opened in the ground. Sections of the walls collapsed, and portions of the castle came down as well. The stones that bounced near Cole kept turning to dust. Several chunks of masonry pummeled the torivor.

For the first time, Ramarro looked afraid.

Suddenly Cole stood on a dark field of volcanic rock. Rivers of lava flowed on either side of him, the searing heat almost too much to bear. The tops of mountains exploded in the distance as lava fountained into a sky saturated with ash.

“We need to talk, Cole,” Ramarro said.

“This seems like a nice place,” Cole said.

“I’m not in a pleasant mood,” Ramarro said. “We have all the time I need. You would be astonished by how long I can make a second last.”

“And at the end of it you’ll die,” Cole said.

“Debatable,” Ramarro said. “I can make you suffer.”

Pyroclastic explosions erupted around Cole. Lava splashed dangerously close. As the dazzling glare faded and the blistering heat subsided, Cole found he was encased to the waist in warm, black stone.

“I can torture you to death in a million ways, Cole,” Ramarro said. “Across a billion landscapes. How long before you break?”

Cole sensed power radiating from Ramarro and realized the torivor was still trying to get free. He was buying himself time with this conversation.

Once again, Cole reached for Ramarro with his mind and found the increasingly familiar location of the torivor’s nexus with little trouble. Penetrating the nexus first, then mangling with all his might, Cole fell out of the dream state. Volcanic rock gave way to the courtyard of the quaking, crumbling castle.

Ramarro finally looked desperate. *You have rattled me, he confessed, weariness behind the words. Ludicrous as it seems, you’re right—I cannot escape with you harassing me. I don’t have time. You don’t know what you are destroying. You can’t begin to imagine all I am. Spare me, Cole.*

“So you can torture me to death in a million ways?” Cole yelled. “So you can destroy my friends? No way!”

The ground was heaving. Ramarro stretched a hand toward him. *Stop fighting me. Work with me, Cole, and we can both still survive. I don't want to risk ending. I will grant whatever you desire.*

“Dream on!” Cole cried.

The courtyard tipped forward and split apart. Everything was falling. Cole plunged through the mist in a hailstorm of shattered stone. And then all the stone became dust. And the mist parted. And the maelstrom yawned below him, a wild vortex that whirled down toward forever.

Off to one side, Cole saw Ramarro falling, arms and legs flailing.

*Unbelievable!* Ramarro cried.

They hit the swirling surface of the vortex simultaneously, perhaps twenty yards apart. Cole tumbled and spun in the hurricane currents, a banshee choir wailing in his ears. He remembered this experience. It was horrifying and familiar.

Somewhere behind all the commotion, Cole could faintly hear the homesong. As he focused on that beckoning music, the tumult seemed to fade.

It was all right.

He could go.

He could die this way.

He had stopped Ramarro.

It had seemed impossible, but he had stopped him.

Cole finally understood the sky castles.

The whole setup had been a trap all along.

A trap set in case the torivors got free.

Dandalus had prepared a battleground that had given Cole a chance.

Cole had made the most of the opportunity. He had fought to keep Ramarro at the doomed castle. And he had won.

He had succeeded.

Now it was up to the vortex. Would it be enough?

Trillian had seen the slipstream in Cole's memory. He had told Cole that he could not have resisted the homesong. And torivors could not lie.

Ramarro would perish. The homesong seemed to promise it.

Cole had saved his friends.

He would miss everyone.



They would miss him.

He was sure they would be proud of him.

He would follow the homesong.

It would lead him to a good place.

A better place than he had ever known.

He was certain. He could feel it so clearly.

Something wrapped around his chest, yanking tight.

He was suddenly hauled free from the screaming currents.

A young man on a flying disk was holding a golden rope. The rope had wrapped around Cole's chest. The young man was Liam.

That couldn't be right.

Cole's vision was fading.

Liam was long gone.

Cole realized he must be dreaming.

And then darkness engulfed him.

## CHAPTER

# 34

## RECOVERY

Cole woke up on a soft bed in an elegantly furnished room. Veins of gray streaked the white marble walls and ceiling. He turned to find Mira seated on a nearby chair, gazing at him tenderly.

“Are we dead?” Cole asked, his throat dry.

“Nope,” Mira said.

“Did we get him?”

“You got him.”

Cole thought hard. “We fell into the vortex.”

“Liam fished you out,” Mira said.

Cole propped himself up on one elbow. His body felt stiff. “I remember Liam. I didn’t think that could be real. Why was Liam there? We haven’t seen him since we fought Carnag.”

“The echo of Dandalus sent for him through Jenna.”

“That must have happened before I went to get her.”

“Yes. She contacted the Unseen in Necronum, who got a message to Liam in hiding. He came here and waited for you. I guess Dandalus expected the fight to end up here.”

“Where are we?” Cole asked.

“Inside the castle behind the cloudwall,” Mira said. “You know, where Declan lived before he was chased away. It was abandoned until we arrived.”

“How did you get here?” Cole asked.

“Lorenzo opened a wayport to here for me, Jace, Twitch, Dalton, Jenna, Hunter, and Violet right after Ramarro followed you to the sky castle. Jace lent Liam the golden rope.”

“It didn’t need my power to work here,” Cole said. “Sambria.”

“I’ve been practicing with my powers since we arrived,” Mira said.

“Did you make any walking mudballs?”

Mira broke eye contact. “Maybe.”

“How long was I out?”

“Three days.”

Cole nodded. His mouth felt dry and tasted funny. “Do you have water?”

She handed him a glass. He took a small sip of the lukewarm fluid. The lining of his mouth seemed to absorb half of it before he could swallow. He took another sip.

“Is your power all right?” Mira asked.

Cole searched inside himself, and his power felt okay but a little unsteady. Cole connected to Mira’s power and gave her some energy.

She sat up straighter. “Good!”

“My power felt injured in the fight,” Cole said. “Still kind of does. At least it still works. More strained than torn. Ramarro came after me with his power. Since he was reaching for me, I found my way to his center and hurt him back. You’re sure the vortex got him?”

“Liam seemed sure,” Mira said. “He saw him descending, round and round, deeper and deeper. Ramarro wasn’t fighting. He just drifted with the flow. Liam watched until he disappeared. We haven’t heard from Ramarro since.”

Cole thought for a moment. “You guys can’t leave here.”

“Not without you. Unless we’re ready for a really long walk.”

“Violet can only open a wayport here with my help. You were betting on me to survive.”

“We bet right,” Mira said. “I should get the others.”

She hurried away.

Before long, Dalton raced into the room. “I knew it!” he cried, running to give Cole a hug. Cole winced as he hugged back, shoulders aching. He felt a little fragile. “I knew you would be all right. How is your power?”

“Working,” Cole said.

“That is a lot more than Ramarro can say,” Jace said as he entered with Twitch. “You realize you’re a legend now.”

Violet, Mira, and Jenna came next, and Hunter and Liam entered last. Cole became the center of smiling attention. He could see they had been worried and were now relieved.

“Thanks for sending Liam,” Cole told Jenna. His eyes shifted to Liam. “Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

“Least I could do after you saved all of us,” Liam said. “It’s a little hard to believe when you get a message from one of the long-dead founders of your world.”

“I know the feeling,” Cole said.

“I guess you do,” Liam said. “Thank Jace, too. Without that golden rope it would have been dodgy.”

“Thanks, Jace,” Cole said.

“Don’t you dare thank me,” Jace said. “Not after what you did. You took Ramarro in a straight fight. All I can do now is thank you forever.”

“The battleground was rigged,” Cole said. “The sky castle was set to respond to my abilities and not to his. He tried to figure out how to escape. I did my best to get in the way.”

“You fought him,” Jace said. “Alone. Dandalus told us where he sent you after Ramarro disappeared. He told us all he could give you was a chance.”

“And you did it, Cole,” Dalton said.

“I fought him hard,” Cole said. “Threw statues at him. Threw the castle at him. I even got to his nexus with my power and hurt him.”

“And don’t forget that you defeated the Perennial Serpent in seconds,” Mira said. “Like it was nothing. Elegance has her power back.”

“I had practice,” Cole said. “Once I knew what to do, that one was easy.”

“And you destroyed Owandell,” Hunter said. “You made that look easy too.”

“It kind of was,” Cole said. “He wasn’t too scary. I knew I could take him with my power. The Jumping Sword was just an experiment.”

“Style points for the sword,” Jace said.

“What do you mean you had practice?” Jenna asked.

Cole explained about the potion that had given him a look at the possible future. He also explained why he mostly kept that information to himself before fighting Ramarro, since the torivor might have read it in other minds.

“So from your perspective, you fought Ramarro twice,” Twitch said. “Brave.”

“The first time was a mess,” Cole said. “The second time went better. At least I wasn’t lost in some forgotten wilderness. We were so worried about you.”

“I may never know exactly where I was,” Twitch said. “Forested hills, with mountains in the distance. A wet region—lots of ponds and streams. I didn’t see another person the entire time. Lots of animals, though. Foraging wasn’t too bad—berries and mushrooms especially. I also caught plenty of fish. I was actually

roasting a couple of trout over a fire when I was transported to the battleground with Ramarro.”

“Sorry,” Cole said. “I know it was dangerous to pull you into that fight.”

“Don’t be sorry!” Twitch said. “It was startling, but it worked beautifully. Here I am.”

“I bet your fish burned, though,” Jace said.

Twitch laughed. “I might have spent the rest of my days roaming a solitary wilderness.”

“I wish I could offer a feast,” Liam said. “You all deserve a feast. But the stores were looted by the soldiers who flushed us out of here.”

“My mother will provide a feast,” Mira said. “All we need is a wayport to the First Castle. I’m sure she went home after Ramarro fell. She’ll be trying to set the kingdom in order.”

Cole stared at his friends. Worlds were colliding before him—his older brother, friends from back home, and friends made as he adventured in the Outskirts. Because of his preparations to fight Ramarro, Cole hadn’t been able to really appreciate having everybody together until this moment.

Cole connected to Violet and energized her ability. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

A wayport opened.

“I’ve got him,” Hunter said, nodding toward Cole.

The others started filing into the wayport.

Liam moved off to one side. “I won’t join you. I need to get back to Declan, and Junction is the wrong direction. Eat something delicious for me, will you?”

“Violet could send you home by wayport from Junction,” Cole said.

Liam paused. “I couldn’t have her send me directly to our new hideout. But she could send me kind of close, and it would save time overall.” He smiled. “Looks like I’m going to get a better dinner than I had planned.”

Hunter helped Cole out of bed. His knees felt sore, and his legs were wobbly. Hunter kept an arm around Cole’s shoulders.

“You proved me wrong,” Hunter said. “I was really worried. But you saved everybody, and you found a way home.”

“Now we just have to track down the other kids,” Cole said.

“I bet Queen Harmony will help,” Hunter said. “Hopefully Violet will too.”

Cole walked unsteadily to the wayport. “How long do you think it will take before we get to walk the Pilgrim Path?”

“We’ll know before long,” Hunter said.

## CHAPTER

# 35

## DEPARTURE

It took three weeks before Cole and Hunter stood in Creon staring at the gaping tunnel of the Pilgrim Path. They were not alone. Under edict from the High Queen, the slaver Ansel had handed over the locations of all the slaves. It might have taken months to collect them under ordinary circumstances, but with Cole empowering Violet, they retrieved every last child within fifteen days. All of the missing kids from Cole's neighborhood stood gathered near the Pilgrim Path, along with Dalton, Jenna, and Joe, whose leg had mostly healed. Little Brady, who had once created his own nightmare playland inside Sambria, stayed beside Joe. Blake, Sarah, and Jill lingered near Jenna.

The High Queen was present as well. When Harmony went to retrieve her husband, she learned he had died the same hour Elegance got her power back. Honor had seemed openly glad about the news. The other princesses had acted torn between sadness and relief. Watching their reactions had reminded Cole that though Stafford had forced them into exile and made their lives difficult, he had been their father. Destiny had wept openly, occasionally muttering "good riddance."

Cole could understand the mixed feelings. Stafford had once been likable. Cole believed the High King initially had good intentions. His relationship with Owandell probably had begun innocently. But the relationship had gotten all twisted, and his choices took darker and darker turns, until Stafford eventually ruined himself and his family. There was plenty of reason to grieve.

All five sisters were in attendance today. Elegance had an arm around Brogan. Desmond attended Honor. Mira stood near Cole. Constance and Destiny held hands. Jace was there as well, and Twitch and Violet.

Lorenzo Debray approached Cole. "All is ready," he said. "Let me remind you that there is no way back from this path if you walk it. Though almost anyone

on Earth could be brought to the Outskirts, there is no known way to retrieve any of you who take this path. You will become permanently out of sync with this realm. You will completely lose your powers, and I suspect your memories of the Outskirts will eventually fade.”

“You think we’ll totally forget?” Cole asked. The prospect seemed ludicrous. How could he ever forget nearly dying? Visiting the afterlife? Saving lives and being saved?

“Consider your own investigation,” Lorenzo said. “The greatest Wayminder of all time, who lived more years in the Outskirts than any other person, lost all sense that it really happened. You have been here for months, not years. You have confronted some very adult problems, but you are young and still growing. I believe the day will come when you will not realize any of this happened.”

Cole looked at Mira, Jace, Twitch, and Violet. How could he forget them? They had survived so much together! They were his closest friends. If anything seemed far away, it was his home in Mesa. The Outskirts were present and tangible. He resolved not to forget.

“You don’t have to go,” Mira said. “You could stay with us. We’re all going to miss you, and not just for your unique powers.”

“I have to go home,” Cole said.

Mira nodded. “I understand. It has been your goal all along.” She raised her voice. “None of you need depart if you would rather stay. Your abilities could be of great use here. I will personally ensure that you will have comfortable housing and a job. With my mother’s decree to end slavery, we are becoming a much more civilized place to live.”

Nobody accepted her offer.

Cole smiled. When Harmony had asked how she could reward him, he had only asked for an end to slavery, followed by help retrieving his friends. She admitted her own conscience had wanted an end to the practice for years and promised to dedicate herself to making it happen.

Jace shook Cole’s hand. “You might forget me, but I won’t forget you.”

Cole hugged his friend. “Keep an eye on Mira.”

Jace winked. “Count on it.”

Jace moved on to talk to Dalton. Twitch came forward and hugged Cole.

“Have fun in your mud baths,” Cole said.

“I don’t think I’ll be in there so much anymore,” Twitch said. “It was a place to hide.”



“Take care of the Halfknight,” Cole said.

“Thanks for everything,” Twitch said.

Violet shook Cole’s hand. “Good job, Cole.”

“Same to you,” Cole said. “Thanks for taking us everywhere.”

“Thanks for making it possible,” Violet said.

Mira hugged Cole swiftly. After the hug, he stared at her. Was he really leaving her? “Take care of the kingdoms.”

“Especially Sambria,” Mira said. “I plan to go train with Declan soon.”

“Say hi to Liam,” Cole said.

“I can never thank you enough,” Mira said. “You know that. Without you we would have been lost. You didn’t just save me. You saved my sisters, my mother, my whole world. For a long time it didn’t seem possible.”

“We all worked together,” Cole said. “Keep an eye on Jace.”

Mira winked. “Have a wonderful life.”

The High Queen stood before the entrance to the Pilgrim Path and raised her voice. “On behalf of the people of Junction and the citizens of the five kingdoms, I apologize that you were taken from your homes. And I thank you for helping to save our world. We will forever owe Cole, Dalton, Brady, Joe, Blake, Hunter, Jenna, and all of you our deepest gratitude. May you travel home safely.”

She stepped aside.

It was time to go.

“Me first,” Blake called, charging down the tunnel. The rest of the kids chased after him, most of them running. Before long only Cole, Hunter, and Dalton remained.

“Ready, little brother?” Hunter asked.

“I guess so,” Cole said. He looked back at Mira, Twitch, Jace, and Violet.

If Cole was going to leave, it was time. He had done all he could for the Outskirts. Over the past three weeks, he had burned away the darkness from the powers of more than five hundred shapecrafters. Having their shapecrafted powers healed was the price the High Queen set for amnesty for those who had sided with Owandell. Many took her up on the offer.

Hunter led the way, then Dalton. Cole stepped into the tunnel last.

“Die bravely,” Jace called. “But not too soon.”

Tears stung Cole’s eyes as he walked down the tunnel. A huge part of him didn’t want to go yet. And then he was standing on his street, in front of his

house, an uncomfortably hot sun not far above the horizon.

The tunnel was gone.

His own house. There it was. Same as ever.

Cole looked at Hunter.

And remembered him.

They used to shoot penalty kicks at each other in the backyard on the bristly lawn. They had home run derbies with Wiffle balls. They rode their bikes around the neighborhood and sometimes on trails in the desert. They had shared a bedroom when Cole was smaller—Hunter on the bottom bunk, Cole on top. They had played with action figures together and shot baskets on the little hoop clipped to the top of their door.

“I remember you,” Cole said.

“About time,” Hunter replied with a smile.

“I knew you were my brother,” Cole said. “It’s just . . . more real now.”

The other kids were dispersing. Dalton lingered. Joe patted Cole on the back. Brady stood beside him. “That your house?”

“Am I staring at it?” Cole asked.

“You are,” Joe said. “And you should. I’m going to find Brady’s home and then make my way to California.”

“We can feed you,” Hunter offered.

“I’m all right,” Joe said. “Lorenzo gave me a lot of money. I’m glad he took an interest in collecting US currency. You guys go see your folks.”

Joe strolled off, holding Brady’s hand.

“I remember the Outskirts just fine,” Dalton observed.

“Me too,” Hunter said.

“Let’s remind each other,” Cole said. “Write it down. Talk about it. Kendo didn’t have other people. I bet we can keep from forgetting by talking about it.”

“Maybe,” Hunter said.

“I should go,” Dalton said. “See you guys later.”

“See you,” Cole said.

“Think it’s summer?” Hunter asked as Dalton walked away.

“Feels like summer,” Cole said. “I hope the AC is cranked up. Think we missed the school year?”

“Probably,” Hunter said. “I wonder what grades you get when your teachers forget all about you?”

“Straight As, I hope,” Cole said. “Let’s go.”

They walked up to the porch and opened the door.

“Cole, Hunter?” their mom called.

“Yeah,” Cole replied.

She came to the entry hall, looking just as Cole remembered her. “Where have you boys been?”

“Um,” Cole said.

“Dinner was ready an hour ago,” she said.

“Sorry,” Hunter said.

“Are you crying, Cole?” his mom asked.

“I think I have some dirt in my eye,” Cole said. He stepped forward and hugged his mom tightly.

“What’s that for?” his mom asked, looking over him at Hunter.

“He’s been emotional today,” Hunter said. “Little weirdo.”

“Mind if I go to my room for a minute?” Cole asked.

“Go ahead,” his mom said. “I’ll warm you a plate.”

“Is Dad around?” Hunter asked. “Chelsea?”

“They’re watching TV,” she said.

Cole walked away from the conversation and went down the hall to his room. The door was closed.

Behind the door, he found all as he had left it. Exactly. Same junk on his desk. Same clothes on the floor. A film of dust covered everything. He had been gone for some time.

Cole knew he had to go see his dad and his sister. He knew he had to go eat dinner. He had to fall back into the rhythms of life as if he had not been away for months in a strange and dangerous world.

For a moment he stared at his familiar room.

His old life felt much more real now that he was here.

The Outskirts seemed a little more distant.

But he could not imagine that he would ever forget.

# EPILOGUE

Cole sat down on a bench by a sidewalk on the ASU campus, not far from the Hayden Library. He was in an awkward time between classes. In half an hour he would head over to the Memorial Union to meet Dalton for lunch. For the moment he figured he would enjoy the relatively mild day and catch up on some reading.

Glancing up, he noticed a beautiful girl walking toward him. There were plenty of pretty girls on campus, but this one was exceptional—tall and slender, with long brown hair and lovely features. He didn't know her, so he tried not to stare, but when his eyes met hers, she smiled as if she wanted to let him in on a private joke. Cole wondered if he might be sitting in her usual spot. As she approached Cole's bench, he stood.

"Hi, Cole," she said.

"Hi," Cole said, delighted she was speaking with him, surprised that she knew his name. Her expressive eyes hinted at a playful mood. "Do I know you?"

Her smile warmed. "We were friends when we were younger."

Cole did not see how that was possible. Could he have forgotten those lively eyes? Maybe she used to wear glasses? Or dyed her hair? He compared her against the neighborhood kids he had grown up with but came up empty.

"How do you like ASU?" she asked.

"Great so far," Cole said. "First semester."

"Hunter goes here too," she said.

"Are you a friend of Hunter's?" Cole asked. That would make sense. Hunter hung out with some cute girls.

"I like Hunter," she said. "But I'm here to see you."

Cole felt a thrill that an attractive stranger was showing him so much attention. She seemed really personable and open. Was she a little familiar, or was it just that she effortlessly treated him like a friend? "Do you go here?"

She shook her head. "I'm from far away. I'm just here briefly."

“What’s your name?”

“Want to guess?”

“It would take a miracle.”

Her smile broadened. “You don’t remember me at all?”

Cole tried. Maybe a girl in one of his classes? Somebody who moved away?  
“Not really.”

She looked a little disappointed, just for a moment. “You used to talk about the Outskirts.”

Cole blushed a little. “That was a game I played with my brother and my friend Dalton.”

“A game?”

“You know, sort of a role-playing game. Like Dungeons and Dragons. Except we made it up. Pretty nerdy, I guess.”

“Tell me about it.”

Her interest mildly surprised him. “We got really into it for a while. We filled up notebooks with stories. I even used to dream about it.”

She looked serious. “Do you think any of it really happened?”

Cole huffed. “I’m not crazy.”

“You used to talk about it like it might have been real.”

“With you?”

“With me.”

Cole gave an uncomfortable laugh. “We acted like it was real. That was the point. In the journals we kept, we wrote about it like it really happened. I can’t believe I told you so much about it. When did I know you? You never told me your name.”

“Mira,” she said. “We’ve met several times, but you don’t remember too well.”

“Are you teasing me?” Cole asked. “One of the characters in our game was named Mira. One of the imaginary ones.”

“That’s funny,” Mira said, pivoting away. “I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Are you going?”

“I should,” Mira said. “I’ll check up on you again. Promise.”

“Want to keep in touch?” Cole asked.

“I’ll be far away and hard to reach,” Mira said. “How are you paying for school?”

Cole was a little surprised by the direct question. “I had saved up, but an anonymous donor is paying for me. The same thing happened to Hunter and my

friend Dalton. Some rich relative maybe?"

"Sounds like you have people watching over you," Mira said. "That must be comforting."

"Kind of mysterious," Cole said. "I wish I could thank them." He paused, considering her. "Are you involved in that?"

Mira flashed a smile. "Maybe a little. Have a good year." She started backing away.

"I'll really see you again?"

"I promise. And some of the others, too."

"Others?"

"You'll see."

"I'll remember you next time."

"Don't hold your breath."

"I doubt I could forget you now."

Mira stepped forward and took his hand. The contact felt good. "What matters is I will remember you, Cole. It can be hard to know how you impact people. Somewhere, there might be entire kingdoms that will never forget you, where people young and old speak of you with awe and consider your birthday an important holiday."

"That's a coincidence," Cole said. "Today is my birthday."

"No kidding? Happy birthday."

Cole smiled. "You have a big imagination. I bet we would have been friends as kids."

Mira released his hand. "You have no idea." She backed away.

"Do you have to go?"

"I should."

"See you next time."

"Count on it."

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My third major series is now complete! So many people made this book and this series possible. I fell behind schedule writing this final book and am so grateful to the readers and publishing people who have been patient with me.

Liesa Abrams was my editor for this entire series, and once again she elevated the quality of the story and the storytelling with her sharp insights. My agent, Simon Lipskar, offered some keen reactions from his formidable mind as well. I'm so lucky to have them in my corner.

The whole team at Simon & Schuster has my gratitude. Owen Richardson executed another terrific cover image. Thanks go to Mara Anastas, Chriscynethia Floyd, Caitlin Sweeny, Jon Anderson, Jodie Hockensmith, Brian Luster, Chelsea Morgan, Mike Rosamilia, Jeannie Ng, Rebecca Vitkus, Amy Bartram, Jessica Handelman, Julie Doebler, Ian Reilly, Jennifer Rothkin, Gary Urda, Christina Pecorale, and so many others.

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Thank you to the teachers, booksellers, and librarians who help bring readers to my work. Without you I would probably end up unemployed!

Finally, I give my thanks to you, the reader. Thanks for bringing this story to life in your imagination. I hope you enjoyed this final volume. Thanks for sharing the story with others. Having readers lets me keep writing stories. I appreciate the opportunity and hope to create a bunch of cool stories in the coming years. More on that in the Note to Readers.

## NOTE TO READERS

Five Kingdoms is now complete. Since the Candy Shop War books are not finished and Spirit Animals was a shared project, I consider this the end of my third major series, after Fablehaven and Beyonders. Thank you to all who have waited for this book. It took a little longer than intended, largely because I wanted to get it right. I hope it satisfies.

Now I will return to writing Dragonwatch, the direct sequel series to Fablehaven, featuring the same main characters. Dragonwatch will be a five-book series, and I have a really great story to tell about a worldwide dragon uprising. I also hope to write a third Candy Shop War book before long, as well as begin some brand-new projects.

If you like these books and haven't tried Fablehaven, it is worth a look. The series deals with secret wildlife parks for magical creatures. Beyonders is perhaps my most epic series, about a couple kids who cross to another world and try to help the broken heroes they find there.

To connect with me, look me up by name on [Facebook](#), follow me on [Twitter](#), and check out my Instagram account, [@writerbrandon](#). My website is [brandonmull.com](#). Basically, if you remember my name, you can find me online. Thank you for your interest!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Author photograph by Laura Hanifin

**Brandon Mull** is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of the Fablehaven, Beyonders, and Five Kingdoms series. He is excited to return to Kendra, Seth, and the world of Fablehaven in the Dragonwatch series. Brandon lives in Utah with his four kids and a dog called Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

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